



**GLOBAL COMMISSION ON  
INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION (GCIM)**

COMMISSION MONDIALE SUR LES MIGRATIONS INTERNATIONALES (CMMI)  
COMISIÓN MUNDIAL SOBRE LAS MIGRACIONES INTERNACIONALES (CMMI)

[www.gcim.org](http://www.gcim.org)

## **GLOBAL MIGRATION PERSPECTIVES**

**No. 6**

**October 2004**

**The transnational turn in migration studies**

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## **Global Commission on International Migration**

In his report on the 'Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change', UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan identified migration as a priority issue for the international community.

Wishing to provide the framework for the formulation of a coherent, comprehensive and global response to migration issues, and acting on the encouragement of the UN Secretary-General, Sweden and Switzerland, together with the governments of Brazil, Morocco, and the Philippines, decided to establish a Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM). Many additional countries subsequently supported this initiative and an open-ended Core Group of Governments established itself to support and follow the work of the Commission.

The Global Commission on International Migration was launched by the United Nations Secretary-General and a number of governments on December 9, 2003 in Geneva. It is comprised of 19 Commissioners.

The mandate of the Commission is to place the issue of international migration on the global policy agenda, to analyze gaps in current approaches to migration, to examine the inter-linkages between migration and other global issues, and to present appropriate recommendations to the Secretary-General and other stakeholders.

The research paper series 'Global Migration Perspectives' is published by the GCIM Secretariat, and is intended to contribute to the current discourse on issues related to international migration. The opinions expressed in these papers are strictly those of the authors and do not represent the views of the Commission or its Secretariat. The series is edited by Dr Jeff Crisp and Dr Khalid Koser, and managed by Rebekah Thomas.

Potential contributors to this series of research papers are invited to contact the GCIM Secretariat. Guidelines for authors can be found on the GCIM website.

## **Introduction**

Several factors suggest the need to reassess the migration-development nexus. First, the remittances migrants and refugees send back to their source countries are often double the size of official development assistance and may be at least as well targeted at the poor in both relatively stable and conflict-ridden areas. Second, migrants and refugees are engaged in a variety of economic, political, social and religious transnational practices that directly affect local development. Third, an increasing number of migrant sending states recognize that migrants and refugees can advance national development from abroad and are endowing emigrants with special rights and protections toward this end.

These and other trends suggest that migrants and refugees' transnational practices are potential development resources and that the links between transnational activism and international development cooperation should be actively explored. However, realizing that potential is not straightforward.

This article is concerned with the policy implications of transnationalism or how migrants' transnational practices can be utilized to further development. By way of introduction, we outline a conceptual approach to transnational migration. The section that follows outlines selective policy responses designed to harness the benefits of transnational migration. Current policy regimes and standard policy repertoires, however, do not take the migration-development nexus sufficiently into account. The concluding section, therefore, raises questions for policymakers to consider in the future.

## **Transnational perspectives on migration**

Transnational theorizing began its development in the early 1990s, when a group of US-based anthropologists found that the migrants with whom they worked had developed transnational practices that conventional migration theories did not adequately capture (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994). They argued that traditional migration theory, informed by and developed in service of the nation-state (Kearney 1991), treated migrants as individuals who either departed (emigrants) or arrived (immigrants).

To overcome this false dichotomy, and to capture migrants' multiple attachments more realistically, researchers proposed that migrants be understood as forming part of two or more dynamically intertwined worlds and transnational migration as "the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch et al 1994:6). Thus, sending and receiving societies became understood as constituting one single field of analysis.

Subsequent proponents of a transnational perspective argued that migrants often interact and identify with multiple nation-states and/or communities, and that their practices contribute to the development of transnational communities (Levitt 2001), or new types of social formations within a transnational social space (Faist 2000). A transnational perspective required abandoning methodological nationalism (the

assumption that the nation-state is the logical, natural container within which social life takes place, see Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). It also required that scholars redirect their analytical focus from place to mobility, and from “place of origin” and “place of destination” to the movements involved in sustaining cross-border livelihoods (Sørensen and Olwig 2002).

Thus, a transnational approach to migration involves examining a different set of questions and taking into consideration a different set of factors than those traditionally taken into account by migration scholarship. The first analytic difference is that transnational migration scholars begin with the understanding that migrants must be studied within the transnational social fields in which they may or may not be embedded.

Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004) have defined social fields as a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed. The boundaries of social fields do not necessarily overlap with those of nations. National social fields are those that stay within national boundaries while transnational social fields connect actors, through direct and indirect relations, across borders.

Conceptualizing the migration experience as taking place within social fields moves the analysis beyond those who actually migrate to those who do not necessarily move but are connected to migrants through the networks of social relations they sustain across borders. This insight is key because it reveals that the development impact of migration is not solely related to return. Because people who stay behind are connected to migrants through social networks, they are exposed to a constant flow of economic and social remittances on a regular basis (Levitt 1999).

Similarly, locating migrants within transnational social fields makes clear that incorporation into a new state and enduring transnational attachments to their countries of origin are not binary opposites. The economic, political and cultural practices of migrant populations are not merely a function of the opportunity structures in migrant-receiving states. While more inclusive structures – which in principle allow for migrant incorporation – may weaken homeland ties, they may also facilitate mobilization around homeland developmental concerns (Østergaard-Nielsen 2001).

### **Migration-development links**

Migration and development are linked in many ways - through the mobile livelihood strategies of individuals, households and communities; through large and often well-targeted remittances; through investments by migrants, refugees, diasporas and transnational communities; and through international mobility associated with global integration, inequality and insecurity. In this section, we selectively review policy responses to transnational migration around the world.

Because migrant remittances have become so important to the economies of many developing countries, they are currently considered the most visible indicator and measurement of the ties connecting migrants to their home countries. In fact, in 2003,

the Global Development Finance Annual Report formally noticed remittances as a source of external development finance for the first time. Even using conservative figures, the Report estimates that migrants sent US\$ 72.3 billion to developing countries in 2001. Of these, Latin America received US\$ 25 billion (Mexico alone US\$ 9.9 billion); South Asia US\$ 16 billion (India alone US\$ 10 billion); and East Asia US\$ 11 billion (the Philippines alone US\$ 7 billion).

Remittances to developing countries, therefore, make up a significant proportion of world financial flows. Taken together, they are greater than the flows of official development assistance, larger than capital market flows, and more than half of foreign direct investment flows to these countries (Naim 2002). Lower middle-income countries receive the largest amounts, but remittances constitute a higher share of total international capital flows to poor countries (Gammeltoft 2002). Remittances also seem to be more stable than private capital flows and to be less vulnerable to changing economic cycles (Ratha 2003:160).

Remittances also play an important role in the accounts of many developing countries and are crucial to the survival of poor individuals and communities around the world. Some states use the promise of future remittances to secure international loans (Guarnizo 2003). The economies of countries such as Albania, El Salvador, Tonga, and Lebanon would collapse if remittance flows dried up (Becker 2004).

Furthermore, some sending country governments recognize the role that migrants can play in shaping receiving-country foreign policy. They represent a potential lobby that, if well organized, could advocate for sending-country interests. Migrants, especially those supporting family members back home, may even influence foreign policy in their countries of origin, as was the case in Iraq during the Nepali hostage crisis. Finally, migrants may strongly influence the non-migrants vote back home.

In response, some source countries have put into place policies designed to encourage emigrants' long-term, long-distance nationalism. In 2000, ten countries in Latin America had passed some form of dual nationality or citizenship, including Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay. Only four countries had such provisions prior to 1991 (Jones-Correa 2002).

Other countries recognize dual membership selectively, with specific signatories. Guatemala has an agreement with other Central American Countries and several Latin American countries have such agreements with Spain. The Chinese government recognizes persons born in China as Chinese citizens, whether or not they desire or claim dual citizenship. In 2003, India recently approved selective dual citizenship to non-resident Indians living in particular countries around the world.

Countries such as Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico also allow the expatriate vote. Again, the Dominican case illustrates the interdependence between source and target country political outcomes. Each of the three principal Dominican political parties has offices in the major migrant destinations such as the United States and Spain. The *Partido de la Liberación* (PLD), in particular, has encouraged Dominicans to become dual citizens so that they will enjoy a more secure position in

the migrant destination and they will be in a better position to advocate for Dominican national interests.

Finally, some countries even grant political rights to emigrants while they are abroad. Colombia allows the expatriate community to elect representatives to the Colombian legislature (Escobar 2004). In the Dominican Republic, several people have been known to run for office from their home communities although it is common knowledge that their primary residence is abroad. In the recent May 2004 elections, Dominican migrants could register to vote in the major places of residence in the United States and Spain. Yet only about 54,000 (out of a migrant population of over one million people) did so, indicating a limited involvement (Itzigsohn 2004).

Granting rights and representation is just one strategy for maintaining migrants' loyalties. A number of governments have also instituted a range of initiatives and have reformed ministerial and consular services to be more responsive to emigrant needs (Levitt and de la Dehesa 2003).

In addition to putting into place investment policies designed to attract and channel economic remittances, some states have also extended state protections or services to nationals living abroad that go beyond traditional consular services, including symbolic policies designed to reinforce emigrants' sense of enduring membership. The Moroccan and Turkish governments have both put into place mechanisms to strengthen the developmental impact of migrant remittances, protect the emigrant community abroad, and promote cultural and religious activities for emigrants (IOM 2003).

Such policy initiatives raise several questions about the migration-development nexus. On a macroeconomic level, Orozco (2003b) characterizes the development impact of migration as captured by "5 T's" – remittance Transfers, Transport, Tourism, Telecommunication, and Trade. Migrants increase demand in each of these sectors in economically beneficial ways. Migrants also contribute financially to home country development because they generate a demand for local goods and services and they imbue those at home with more power with which to purchase them (Guarnizo 2003).

But what is the effect of remittances on household level dynamics? Are remittances spent productively, on investments and improvements, or are they merely used for consumption? While much research finds the latter, and focuses on the appliances, home renovations, and clothing remittances purchase, several recent studies found that remittances were used to finance education or to offset retirement expenses by functioning like quasi-pensions (Sørensen, Van Hear and Engberg-Pedersen 2003a; Sørensen, Van Hear and Engberg-Pedersen 2003b; Sørensen 2004).

Other studies have found that a higher percentage of income was allocated toward health care and toward improving agriculture (Andrade-Eekhoff and Silva-Avalos 2003). In fact, because remittances seem to have so much productive potential, policymakers are working to lower the cost of remittance transfers to increase their cost effectiveness (Orozco 2002).

A second set of questions concern the role of collective resources. Some immigrant communities organize abroad to promote infrastructure and social service programs in

their home communities. They may organize hometown associations (HTAs) in cooperation with an already-established counterpart group in their community or they may be the impetus for the group's creation. Orozco (2003a) estimates that in Mexico alone these organizations contribute up to \$60 million a year for public works projects above and beyond what they are already sending to their families.

Several governments have worked actively to promote HTA growth and cooperation (Goldring 2002; Popkin 2003). In Morocco, the state-led Hassan II foundation, is working to enhance Morocco's influence in host countries by encouraging partnerships between migrant associations and host communities (IOM 2003).

The Mexican government also instituted a 3x1 program whereby migrant-generated funds are matched by contributions from the local, state, and federal governments. The Salvadoran Government has a similar program entitled, Programa Unidos Por La Solidaridad whereby associations, municipalities, and groups of Salvadorans living outside the country can compete for government funding to support public works and social development projects (MREES 2003).

HTA associations are praised as powerful development engines and criticized as disproportionately burdening migrants with the task of economic growth. In one of the most comprehensive reports to date on HTAs in Mexico, Manuel Orozco characterized these groups as;

small philanthropic players with capacities to promote development, particularly when working in partnership with other players. (2003a:42)

He found, however, that most groups had limited ability to manage and oversee projects and emphasized the need for technical assistance before they undertake more challenging and ambitious activities. He also stressed the potentially positive role that government incentives could play in attracting private sector involvement and in carrying out investment feasibility analyses.

### **Policy opportunities and pitfalls**

The previous section outlined examples of policies designed to harness the developmental benefits of transnational migration. In this concluding section, we highlight some of the challenges and contradictions that future policy developments should keep in mind.

#### **Who is the target population?**

Transnational migration creates at least three distinct categories of experience - those who actually migrate, those who stay behind but receive support from those who migrate, and those who do not migrate and have no sources of outside support. Clearly, those who have no outside support are the most needy. Not only do they lack access to the additional resources generated by migration but they now live in a context where it has become the norm to consume goods beyond their reach. Households and communities become accustomed to a lifestyle that they cannot

sustain on their own. The risk is that the incentives for states to undertake economic reforms weakens with each remittance transfer.

The unequal distribution of migration's rewards also creates a disjuncture between the needs of the individual and the collective. Migration might endow individuals with more money to go to school or get health care but it does not always bring about concomitant improvements to the educational or health care system. This disconnect between the better-off individual and the perpetually needy collective also creates a challenge for targeting programmatic resources. Matching fund schemes may help ensure the flow of remittances while simultaneously ensuring that a reasonable proportion of those monies are directed at the poor.

Since class and educational background, access to social networks, and gender determine who migrates and who stays behind, transnational migration is likely to increase socio-economic differentiation. Policymakers might also explore purposefully linking those with more education and access to those who remain excluded from such networks as a way to counteract the negative effects of heightened stratification.

State regulation in host societies – through immigration policy, citizenship, integration, labour market regulations, and social welfare policies – is subtly related to more implicit, micro-political forms of exclusion and inclusion. One of development policy's primary, overarching objectives should be to reduce poverty and make globalization work for all. Toward this end, attempts to align migration and development policies need to include fair and effective migration and asylum approaches that do not, by definition, prevent the poor and unskilled from migrating nor deprive those in need of protection from receiving it.

### **Conflicts between migrant and non-migrant interests**

Over time, the interests of migrants' and nonmigrants' tend to diverge. Many migrants want their homeland to stay the way it was before they left. They want a place that is comfortable to visit or retire to. Who should speak for the village or the nation? How can migrant concerns be taken into account without discounting the priorities of those who remain behind? Should sending states devote resources toward emigrants that could help those at home?

Another way of putting this is whose voice is and should be heard? Since migrants foot the bill for many development activities, their priorities often receive top bill. Luin Goldring (2002) found that hometown associations were better platforms for men than for women. Similarly, governments and political parties, interested in courting migrants, have been found to pander to their interests at the expense of those who stay behind (Popkin 2003).

Migration and development policies often overlook that transnational communities consist of those who migrate and those who stay behind. They are directed at either the source or the destination country, while the groups that they target are deeply embedded in social and economic networks encompassing several states. Moreover, such policies tend to ignore that men and women and dark-skinned and light-skinned



individuals within the same households have different identities and needs. Policy, then, also needs to take the opportunities and constraints facing particular groups into account.

### **Development, but at whose expense?**

Migrants make major contributions to community development. Some argue, however, that despite improved living conditions and infrastructure, such projects disproportionately burden migrants and make them responsible for functions that rightfully belong to states. Although remittances make significant contributions to economic development and family survival, they can also place a tremendous burden on those who send them. Family and kinship links, while providing network support, can also be a source of never ending obligations.

Such demands can work against migrants' social mobility in the host country and also make accumulating capital for return or investing back home very difficult. Susan Martin (2001) reminds us, in particular, to remember the costs to those who remit.

Development agencies should be careful that their renewed focus on diasporas and remittances does not place additional stress on already vulnerable groups. A way out of this conundrum could be to build capacity, strengthen organizations, and increase skills so that migrants can protect their interests more effectively. Another strategy would include fostering cooperation between grassroots groups so that communities work cooperatively and no one community is disproportionately burdened.

### **Social remittances: a potential resource?**

Social remittances are the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that migrants export to their home communities. They may include ideas about democracy, health, gender, equality, human rights and community organization. They differ from global cultural flows in that it is possible to identify the channels through which they are disseminated and the determinants of their impact. Social remittances are both positive and negative. While some see migrants as a force for greater democratization and accountability, others hold them responsible for rising materialism and individualism (Levitt 2001).

Social remittances are an under-utilized development resource that can potentially be purposefully harnessed to improve socioeconomic indicators in both sending and receiving countries. Since migrants and non-migrants are embedded in transnational social fields, the forces shaping their socioeconomic status are also transnational.

By systematically encouraging flows of information about health or education back to the source country and stimulating a parallel flow of information to the host country, practitioners and policymakers can draw on the same multiple sets of ideas, beliefs and resources that migrants do. In this way, teachers and health care providers in the home and host-country get a better understanding of the transnational factors shaping migrants' lives and have access to an enhanced set of tools with which to improve them.

## **Promoting development through return and repatriation**

Return and repatriation are generally seen as the natural “end product” of the migration cycle and a prerequisite for migrants’ and refugees’ continued engagement with local development. Ideally, migrants are expected to have saved capital and acquired skills abroad that can be productively invested in the sending country (Sørensen et al 2003a).

Of the three “durable” solutions to refugee crises – integration in the first country of asylum, resettlement in a third country, or return to the homeland – the latter is seen as the best and most “natural” option. Yet, not enough attention has been paid to how these different outcomes are shaped by returnees’ personal characteristics, duration of stay abroad, level of incorporation into host countries, and the motivations underlying different types of return.

Several studies suggest that return after a brief period abroad, especially among low skilled migrants who were unable to adapt to the host country or who had to return precipitously is less likely to contribute to development. Return after a longer stay abroad, after migrants have been able to save money to meet specific development goals, has much greater development potential (Sørensen et al 2003a). Whether return or repatriation will benefit local development also varies according to the aptitude and skills of the returnees, and whether or not the country of origin affords a propitious social, economic and institutional environment (Ghosh 2000).

In the case of refugee repatriation, a political climate that encourages cooperation between former adversaries is also important. Evidence suggests, however, that states with a history of recent violent conflict are more willing to encourage refugees to contribute resources from abroad rather than to return and participate directly in the post-conflict nation-state building process.

Repatriation or tight restrictions on entry may have far-reaching consequences for the migration-development link. If too many migrants return to developing countries, or the resolution of conflict is accompanied by large-scale repatriation, remittance flows will rapidly diminish, increasing the potential for renewed instability. Moreover, the trend towards containing refugees and asylum seekers in their countries or regions of origin means that those remaining will have more limited livelihood strategies and therefore less potential to generate remittances than those in more prosperous migration countries (Sørensen et al 2003b).

## **The issue of trust**

The vast majority of migrants distrust government. The word “corruption” is the first thing on their lips when they describe politicians at home. They wonder why sending governments are interested in them now, when they never were before they migrated. They prefer to give directly to a needy individual than to any group, particularly one associated with the state. For any state-driven efforts to be successful, migrants need

to learn to trust government. Moreover, they need a good reason to do so. This is a particularly high barrier to making transnational policies work.

Critics will say that migrants' income, skills, and philanthropic efforts should be directed at the country where they make their living. Those in source countries may argue that emigrants have no right to a political voice because they have abandoned ship and lost touch with the day-to-day realities in their former homelands. These are valid concerns. We are entering into unexplored policymaking territory. There are no easy ways to balance transnational migrants' resources, rights and responsibilities.

## **Conclusion**

Grantmakers, policymakers, and practitioners cannot balk at the complicated questions pertaining to transnationalism. The challenge is to figure out how individuals whose lives span several countries, economies, and cultures can best be protected and represented and what we should expect from them in return. To meet this challenge, we need to acknowledge the interdependence between source and destination countries and begin to solve problems by looking outside the nation-state box.

Rather than seeing remittance flows as a drain on the destination country bank account, we can see them as a way to rectify years of uneven development. In times of declining aid budgets, we should not expect migrants' private transfers to make up for the home states' responsibilities. On the other hand, we should not forget that migrant remittances constitute an enormous development resource.

Rather than seeing Dominican and Colombian transnational political groups as suspect for their dual agendas, we can also see them as strengthening democracy at home and fostering migrant political integration into the United States and other major migrant destinations. Instead of seeing Pakistani and Indian entrepreneurs as part of homeland brain drain, we can seek ways to turn their efforts into brain circulation and brain gain.

People in the 21st century will claim multiple political and religious identities, to both national and transnational groups. The critical task is to understand the way individuals and organizations actually operate across nation-states, and the costs and benefits of these arrangements. It is to understand how ordinary individuals and organizations negotiate these challenges, who wins and who loses, and how they redefine the boundaries of belonging along the way.

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