



Published on *migrationpolicy.org* (<http://www.migrationpolicy.org>)

[Home](#) > "It's Not Just About the Economy, Stupid" - Social Remittances Revisited

THE ONLINE JOURNAL of the MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE

MIGRATION INFORMATION SOURCE

FRESH. GLOBAL. AUTHORITATIVE.

"It's Not Just About the Economy, Stupid" - Social Remittances Revisited

MAY 21, 2010

FEATURE

By Peggy Levitt, Deepak Lamba-Nieves

Migrants sent \$338 billion to their homelands in 2008, according to the World Bank. Origin-country governments and aid agencies alike readily acknowledge this is no small chunk of change. In the last decade, they have adopted a wide range of policies designed to purposefully tap into the economic power and promise of remittances.

Whether we see remittances as a development panacea or as a way for states to shift responsibility for solving structural problems to migrants, economics is not the whole story.

Migrants from the developing world bring with them social remittances — defined as ideas, know-how, practices, and skills — that shape their encounters with and integration into their host societies. They also send back social remittances that promote and impede development in their countries of origin. Social remittances are often referenced in the literature but not well understood.

Defining Social Remittances

In her 2001 book, *The Transnational Villagers*, sociologist Peggy Levitt coined the term *social remittances* to call attention to the fact that migrants send home more than money.

She observed at least four types of social remittances — norms, practices, identities, and social capital — circulating between Boca Canasta, a village in the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood in Boston, where many Boca Canasteros settled.

Social remittances circulate in several ways: when migrants return to live in or visit their communities of origin; when nonmigrants visit their friends and family in a receiving country; or through letters, videos, e-mails, blogs, and phone calls. Social remittances about gender, politics, and religion, among other topics, are distinct from but reinforce and are reinforced by other forms of global cultural circulation. For example, people are exposed to values and behaviors when they surf the Internet or watch television.

Over the last 10 years, Levitt and, more recently, her colleague Deepak Lamba-Nieves have continued to study social remittances. Here, we revisit the concept and clarify it in three key ways.

First, we stress the circular nature of these exchanges by showing how the social remittances that migrants bring with them challenge and transform the beliefs and practices of people already living in host societies (be they immigrants or the native born) which, in turn, influences what immigrants then re-remit back home.

Second, we propose a more inclusive definition of social remittances that encompasses cultural as well as social elements and that differentiates between individual and collective social remittances. We emphasize the negative and positive impacts of social remittance exchanges for migrants and nonmigrants alike.

Finally, we show how social remittances influence development by scaling up to other levels of governance and scaling out to other domains of practice. We draw selectively on examples from our own work and the work of our colleagues to illustrate these points.

Social Remittances Circulate

The ideas and experiences migrants bring with them strongly influence who and what they are exposed to and interact with in the countries where they settle. These circumstances then affect the social remittances migrants send back.

Some migrants, for example, come from communities with strong traditions of participation, be it in religious organizations, communal land management and farming schemes, or sports clubs. It is natural for them to reorganize themselves collectively when they move, and they do so with a great deal of skill and know-how.

When Boca Canasteros recreated their baseball league in Boston, they not only came into contact with other immigrant and native-born players and fans, they also had to learn to negotiate the municipal park system and to secure permits for hosting fundraising events.

In contrast, Indian migrants from Gujarat State living in the United States transplanted highly developed, hierarchically organized religious organizations that provided strong social supports. However, these organizations resulted in few contacts with their native-born neighbors or with city and state government.

The ideas and skills that each group sent home differed markedly. In the case of Boca Canasta, migrants encouraged their nonmigrant counterparts to adopt the same kind of organized schedule for the playing fields and facilities they used in Boston. They wanted builders and caterers back home to sign contracts and stick to deadlines in the same way they saw food and beverage suppliers held accountable in the United States.

The Gujarati migrant community, in contrast, emphasized the importance of formal religious education for children, a priority in a Christian-majority nation. They sent back to Gujarat models for organizing religious education and what should be taught.

Social Remittances Are Positive and Negative

Not all of the ideas and practices migrants send back to their homelands are positive. There are both benefits and costs as we outline below.

Much work suggests that social remittances shake up gender and generational dynamics in ways that benefit women. Migrant men and women throughout Latin America and Asia, who work and share responsibility for housecleaning and child care, talk about and model gender relations differently when they visit or return to their home communities.

When religious institutions double as social and cultural centers, women are often allowed to participate in and lead activities in ways that were closed off

to them in the past. This happens when people migrate to the United States and Europe but also in cases of movement between developing countries or rural to urban migration.

Writer Amitav Ghosh for example, found that rural Egyptians who had migrated to Iraq sent back ideas and beliefs that challenged the village status hierarchy and allowed for greater social mobility. Anthropologist Gunvor Jonsson found that people who moved to the city from urban villages in rural Mali introduced new consumer patterns and desires, ranging from clothes to music and food, and different ideas about romance, democracy, and youth culture.

Social remittances also influence health outcomes. Because Boca Canasteros earned more money and received more education in the United States, we found that many people became more health conscious. They were more likely to drink bottled water, keep animals out of living spaces, and recognize the importance of annual check-ups (because they were entitled to them through their medical insurance in the United States).

Knowledge about contraception also reached nonmigrants in rural Guatemala, sent both by migrants' family members and friends in the United States and people who moved to Guatemala's cities. Demographers David Lindstrom and Elena Muñoz-Franco found that knowledge of contraceptive methods strongly predicted contraceptive use.

Attitudes toward education can also shift. As more young people from Boca Canasta completed high school and went on to higher education in the United States, their nonmigrant peers also wanted to go to college. In the Gujarati community, as young people ventured into a wider range of careers, it became more acceptable to study international relations and humanities instead of just finance, medicine, or pharmacology.

Social remittances can also challenge people's ideas about democracy and the rule of law. Political scientist Luis F. Jiménez found that migration transformed local Mexican politics. More migrants and nonmigrants participated politically, and the balance of power between political actors shifted. However, the effects did not last due to entrenched interests.

Return migrants to Governador Valadares in Brazil had much to say about Brazilian politicians and lawyers based on their experiences in the United States. "We have a democracy in Brazil," Gilberto, age 65, told Levitt, "but it doesn't work as it should. You have a system of checks and balances there."

Every time a street light went out or the garbage wasn't collected, Gilberto visited City Hall. "I learned this in the United States – that governments can do what they're supposed to do and that citizens should make sure that happens. I'm trying to get people here to understand that they don't have to accept business as usual."

Finally, hi-tech professionals and entrepreneurs from Pakistan and India not only send back new technology and skills but ideas about conducting business. Working in the United States has emboldened some to take chances, think outside the box, and challenge a superior rather than deferring to him.

"The first thing my boss taught me when I arrived in the United States," Amir, a 35-year-old engineer from Karachi said, "was not to stand up when he came into the room or to call everyone 'Sir.'" While deference and obedience might work back home, Amir realized that U.S. companies valued individuality and innovation.

By no means, though, is everything that migrants send back positive. Both individuals and community leaders often speak about their fear that migrants import values that weaken families, deify consumerism, and encourage sexual permissiveness.

Migrants and nonmigrants in the Caribbean and Central America are also concerned about residents who get deported after engaging in criminal activities in the United States. Numerous hometown residents and local officials argue that they bring bad habits, set a poor example for local youth, compromise the reputation of immigrants abroad, and import new criminal technologies and contacts with international crime syndicates.

Resident and nonresident South Asians alike hold migrants responsible for the rising popularity of fundamentalist Hinduism in India and Islam in Pakistan. This is not only because of the money migrants donate but because of the more conservative religious beliefs and styles they adopt and import once they move to the West.

Social remittances can also contribute to a "culture of migration" that makes moving almost inevitable because people are no longer satisfied by the economic and social opportunities their homelands offer. This is true in communities throughout Latin America and Asia but also in places such as Ireland, where, even during a period of unprecedented economic growth from the late 1990s through the 2000s, young people still emigrated because centuries-old habits and rites of passage die hard.

Even what first appears to be a positive development can have negative spillover effects. One Dominican migrant, for example, who wanted to build a housing development back home, firmly pledged to do so according to rules and codes so that it would not turn into a "slum" of poorly built buildings.

The idea, he said, came from the building projects and sales contracts he observed in the United States. He imagined, however, a gated community that would only attract exclusive, well-to-do buyers. Although he promoted an ordered and planned approach to development, he also exacerbated class stratification that had already worsened because of migration.

Collective Social Remittances

Most of our examples so far involve the exchange of ideas and behaviors between individuals. Our recent research suggests that social remittances are also harnessed collectively. We focus on two hometown associations (HTAs) in the Dominican Republic: Modebo and Soprovis, based in Boca Canasta and Villa Sombrero (a neighboring town), to make our case.

HTAs allow immigrants from the same city or region to maintain ties with and materially support their places of origin. Sometimes migrants and nonmigrants organize separate organizations, partnering with whatever group best furthers their specific project goals. In the case of Modebo and Soprovis, migrants and nonmigrants belong to the same organization and work together from their different locations.

When people first left the Dominican Republic, nonmigrant members selected and administered most of the HTA's projects. As U.S. members' fundraising capacities increased, migrant members of both groups began designing projects based on their experiences in the United States. These included setting up a fire station with its own fire truck, building different kinds of sports facilities, purchasing an ambulance, and organizing AIDS awareness and sexual-health campaigns.

Migrant members supported activities like the sports complex because they had grown accustomed to these kinds of facilities in Boston. They saw the complex as a way to keep families together, help youth, and nurture new baseball talent.

They also wanted to be able to use the facility during their vacations back home, and they were able to convince their nonmigrant counterparts of the

value of such efforts. The sports complex, which cost about \$200,000, is the biggest project Soprovís has undertaken.

When speaking about his migrant colleagues, the current Dominican Republic-based president told us, "Because they are in a developed country, they are looking at other types of constructions, edifices, other sports complexes and they want to bring those ideas to their community...Boston has always thought big."

The Boston leaders also proposed building a paved road to the sports facility (which is far from the town's center) and an avenue leading to the nearby beach as part of efforts to increase tourism in the area. This "thinking big" and "different outlook" came up repeatedly in our interviews.

Nonmigrants not only became convinced that this forward-thinking mentality was good for development, they also came to believe that a more orderly and purposeful approach to infrastructure projects, like building access roads, should not be afterthoughts. Collective social-remittance exchanges reinforced a respect for the rules and laws that migrants had observed in the United States and changed ideas about planning, development, and progress.

Putting Collective Social Remittances into Practice

Finally, social remittances, whether they are exchanged between individuals or groups, do not stay put. They scale out into other domains of practice and scale up to other levels of governance.

Let's go back to the fire station example. Delivering a fire truck to Villa Sombrero was not enough to modernize the town's approach to public safety. The residents had to establish a committee to train volunteer firefighters, identify a locale that could serve as a fire station, and find a place to safely store the vehicle. More importantly, they had to find a way to pay for the equipment and labor.

Because HTA members in Boston were not willing to fund these efforts indefinitely, they began pressuring government officials to assume some of the burden of support. The mayor eventually agreed.

Thus, a project migrants conceived became a joint citizen-state effort that redefined the responsibilities of the state and community groups. In addition, the project went beyond public safety to show how the state could partner with the community to provide a range of services. Community members are now

seeking similar kinds of cost-sharing arrangements with the municipal and provincial authorities around health and education.

These kinds of values and skills also scale up. When Levitt did her original fieldwork, many of the people she talked to did not consider the state responsible for providing basic services like health care and public safety because they saw the government as overwhelmed by so many other tasks.

Now, migrants from the Dominican Republic see these activities as an integral part of good governance. As more people adopt this stance, the more these social remittances can scale up to higher government levels. We could also imagine the case of changing gender roles scaling up and out to affect reproductive behavior and labor market participation among women.

Looking Ahead

Social remittances are an understudied, important piece of the migration-development nexus. Their impact on immigrant incorporation and sending-community dynamics is not well understood. How they influence development-project outcomes, in origin or in settlement countries, is often overlooked.

Wherever you fall on the migration-development debate, it is important to factor social remittances into the equation. They are a potential resource and a potential constraint.

To help policymakers concerned about development, researchers need to uncover what determines how ideas and values travel and under what circumstances idea change contributes to behavioral and institutional change. Another question to answer: when does local-level change in something like gender relations, for example, scale up to produce broader shifts in reproductive behavior and labor market participation?

Scholars and practitioners either focus on what happens to immigrants once they arrive in a new place or what happens in the places where they come from. This artificial separation does not reflect migrants' lives, nor does it allow policymakers to respond creatively to the challenges migrants face. Migration research needs to span migrants' origin and destination countries and go beyond economic considerations to include the social and cultural.

Sources

Ghosh, Amitav. 1992. *In An Antique Land*. London: Granta Books.

Jonsson, Gunvor. 2007. *The Mirage of Migration: Migration Aspirations and Immobility in a Malian Soninke Village*. Master's thesis no. 466, University of Copenhagen: Institut for Antropologi.

Jiménez, Luis F. 2008. *De Paisano a Paisano: Mexican Migrants and the Transference of Political Attitudes to their Country of Origin*. PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh. **Available online**.

Levitt, Peggy. 2001. *The Transnational Villagers*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

———. 2007. *God Needs No Passport*. New York: The New Press.

Lindstrom, D. P., and E. Munoz-Franco. 2005. Migration and the Diffusion of Modern Contraceptive Knowledge and Use in Rural Guatemala. *Studies in Family Planning* 36(4):277-288.

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS ABOUT THIS ARTICLE, CONTACT US
AT **Source@MigrationPolicy.org**

Source URL: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/its-not-just-about-economy-stupid-social-remittances-revisited>