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Transnational activities of Colombians in the US

A qualitative exploration of the migration-development nexus

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to analyse the transnational activities of Colombian migrants in the USA; the reasons why migrants engage, or not, in these activities; and the impact of migrants' transnational activities at the household, community and national levels.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper analyses data obtained from focus groups with migrant families and interviews with government officials and an expert researcher, as well as secondary data sources.

Findings – The main transnational activities in which Colombian migrants engage in are individually oriented, while participation in collective actions such as philanthropy or membership of political parties and hometown associations is limited. The impact of those activities varies when analysed at different levels. Overall, transnational activities of Colombian migrants can be seen as contributing to the perpetuation of south–north dependency, even if they help improve the socioeconomic situation of migrants and their families.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the migration–development nexus debate by pointing to the significance of distinguishing the level of analysis (micro, meso and macro) when studying the impacts of transnationalism on development.

Keywords Transnationalism, Agency and structure, Colombian migration, Migration-development nexus

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The debate surrounding the migration–development nexus, which has been a central topic for scholars interested in migration (De Haas, 2010, 2012; Raghuram, 2007), remains unsettled. More “optimistic” views (1950s to 1960s and 1990s to 2000) have pointed to the benefits migration can have on the development of the countries of origin, exemplified by brain gain and circulation, remittances, technology and knowledge transfers, increase in investment, trade and income, poverty reduction, education and



health improvements and multiplier effects. In contrast, more “pessimistic”, critical appraisals (1960s to 1970s, and perhaps today) have argued that migration can hurt the country’s development because it leads to brain drain, dependency, inequality and a decrease in local output. Indeed, it has been argued that migration also causes economic and political stagnation in migrants’ countries of origin (Portes, 2011). In general, extant literature presents a dichotomised portrayal of migration being *either* positive *or* detrimental to development.

With our paper, we contribute to the research on the relationship between migration and development. In particular, we respond to De Haas’s (2012) call for carrying out more nuanced investigations, through drawing attention to the complexity of issues surrounding the impact of migration on development at different levels of analysis. Specifically, we focus on the transnational activities of Colombian migrants living in the USA, and their possible impact on the socioeconomic environment of the sending nation. We analyse these at three levels: the macro level of the economy, the meso level of the community and the micro level of the household unit. Through this, we also build a better understanding of the potential impacts of migration and transnationalism in diverse spheres within the countries of origin (Ghosh, 2006; Guarnizo, 2003). We focus not only on the activities of Colombian migrants but also on the government’s initiatives. Our research, thus, contributes to developing a better understanding of policy formation regarding migration and development.

The USA has historically been a place of destination for many Latin American (LA) migrants, especially those from Mexico (Orozco and Nancy, 2008). Unsurprisingly, most studies concerned with LA migration have addressed Mexican transnational activities. Notwithstanding the importance of the Mexican case, we should not extrapolate its findings to other LA countries, as the composition, socio-cultural profile, geographical location and characteristics of migrants from other LA countries are diverse, and therefore their effects in home countries might potentially be different (Hansen, 2012).

Most Colombian migrants are located in the USA. Colombian migration to the USA gained momentum in the 1960s, motivated mainly by the internal violence in the country and the migration regulation in place in the USA during those years (Diaz, 2008). This migration pattern has continued today despite changes in the USA migration policy, due to diverse economic restructuring processes occurring in Colombia, a cumulative effect of the migration process, internal conflicts and drug trafficking activities (Diaz, 2006). While not as significant – in terms of the overall volume – as Mexican migration, the Colombian migrant population in the USA deserves research interest in its own right. This is not only because we currently know much less about Colombian migration than we do about migrants in the USA coming from countries such as Mexico, China or India, but also because – looking at the LA region – the characteristics of Colombian migrants are qualitatively different from those of the Mexican ones. For example, Colombian migrants, who represent 10 per cent of the overall Colombian population (Colombia Nos Une, 2013), and are the biggest South American migration group in the USA (Motel and Pattern, 2012), tend to be more highly educated than others from the region (Medina and Posso, 2009) and, unlike Mexican migrants, come mainly from urban areas (Diaz, 2006; Cardona Sosa and Medina, 2006).

Transnational activities of individuals living between two or more countries directly and indirectly impact international business activities. Even though their overall influence might not be as high as that of multinational corporations, they are without a doubt of significance for international business, as they contribute to the volume of international transportation, investment, trade, financial markets transactions and telecommunication services. Analysing critically transnational activities can not only shed light on the players and stakeholders – beyond an emphasis on multinationals – within the contemporary globalised world. It can also provide insights necessary for further theorisation around the importance of individual activities oriented internationally, and the role of the government in relation to these previously ignored international activities. The study of migration and transnationalism therefore has a valuable contribution to make to critical research on international business (Roberts and Dörrenbächer, 2012), and can broaden international business studies horizons through including new perspectives (Westwood and Jack, 2007).

This article is structured as follows. First, we offer a critical overview of the extant literature on the migration–development nexus. This is followed by a discussion of transnationalism in relation to the Colombian context. We then explain the methodology used, before moving on to discussing the main transnational activities of Colombian migrants and the ways in which these have affected the situation in Colombia at the level of households, communities and the whole nation, as well as the role of governmental initiatives directed at these activities. Finally, we offer concluding remarks regarding the impact of transnational activities at the micro, meso and macro levels, in relation to the specific context of the country of origin and the characteristics of the migrants, as well as the role of the government.

Migration, transnationalism and development

Early studies attempting to analyse the migration–development nexus date back to the 1950s and 1960s, when most researchers, mainly within economics and geography, pointed to the developmental benefits migration could have for both sending and receiving countries. These benefits were analysed from the perspective of neoclassical theory of migration, based on the initial work of Ravenstein (1885, 1889) and later reformulated by Todaro (1969) and Harris and Todaro (1970). The neoclassical view addresses only one type of migration, i.e. labour migration and treats it as a “natural” component of development, supporting the perfect allocation of the productive resources of labour and capital, thus benefiting sending and receiving countries and yielding economic growth. This perspective, however, does not consider structural constraints on development (De Haas, 2010), such as the costs and risks associated with moving abroad. Moreover, while providing a general picture of migration at the macro-national level, and the micro-individual level, it does not offer insights into the meso-community level impact of migration.

In contrast to the neoclassical paradigm, the World Systems Theory, developed by the Marxist sociologist Wallerstein (1974, 1980), provided a new critical lens to study international migration. Here, migration is portrayed as a cause of underdevelopment, which is negative and detrimental for the sending country. The theory considers migration to be based on the historical constitution of the global market, and the cultural and economic ties kept with the colonies, whereby the expansion of capitalism has

reinforced the economic and political differences between developing and developed nations, leading to more underdevelopment, and causing brain drain and even greater dependency on the developed north. As part of this phenomenon, labour and capital both flow in the same direction: towards developed countries. When migrating, individuals do not have a free choice to exercise their agency because the structure constrains them; they move because they have to.

While more insightful than the neoclassical perspective, the World Systems Theory is not free from limitations. It does not explain diverse migration patterns (e.g. south-to-south or north-to-south migration) or the reasons why some developing countries that were net exporters of labour have improved their own development levels. The view of individuals as passive agents who do not make decisions on their own is also problematic, as it does not account for the extent to which individuals do, indeed, make choices about whether and where to migrate.

In a similarly critical manner, dual labour theory (Piore, 1979) considers the structure of labour markets' demand in developed countries. Developed countries need cheap labour to work in jobs that are not appealing to national workers, posts that can be filled by migrants coming from developing nations. These migrants, whether skilled or unskilled, will accept those jobs because of the income they generate, which tends to be higher than what they can earn at home. Therefore, the demand for cheap labour from the north can increase brain drain and lead to labour exploitation. As a result, receiving countries benefit from migration, to the detriment of developing countries and their emigrant workers.

Since the 2000s, there has been a shift in perspectives on the migration–development nexus towards more enthusiastic appraisals. In part, this has been associated with the increasing growth in remittances sent to developing countries. Moreover, a view of migration as having a positive effect on development has been promoted by neoliberal agendas. Two theoretical stances, the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM, Stark, 1991) and transnationalism (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1995; Portes, 2001), are of particular importance in this context. Both perspectives, while developed in different academic disciplines, reflect the need to include structure and agency in migration and development studies, and they portray migration as having beneficial impacts for countries of origin thanks to remittances (NELM) and due to a wide range of transnational activities pursued by migrants. Empirically, however, the proposed favourable outcomes of migration on development both theories purport have not been established. Currently, the discourse is moving towards considering circular migration as a possible “growth tool” for developing countries (Skeldon, 2012). Yet, this approach overlooks the difficulty of designing policies directed towards circularity to accomplish return, and ignores the structural conditions in the country of origin, which, if not improved, are likely to adversely affect development.

Over the years, the migration–development research and perspectives have been underpinned by different interests. For example, the neoliberal thinking behind some development organisation (e.g. BID, IOM and UN) discourses has promoted a view of migration as a desirable phenomenon, representing freedom of movement; encouraging enterprise, international investment, international trade and international financial markets activities; and creating a “flexible” labour market, while also resulting in poverty reduction and increased growth thanks to remittances (UNDP, 2009; Vammen and Bronden, 2012). Such perspectives on migration, however, have disregarded the

broader historical, political and economic context within which migration occurs, and the internal problems faced by sending countries due to the continued dependence of the “south” on the “north”. The proponents of migration as a phenomenon beneficial for development have not engaged with the structural and developmental imbalances between countries at a global level. Rather, neoliberal discourses have considered the act of migrating purely as a strategy of an individual exercising her or his agency in a situation where one’s needs in relation to building a livelihood are not met within the home country.

These structural imbalances, especially the dependency of the global “south” on the “north”, have been highlighted in discussions surrounding post-colonialism and neo-colonialism (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Westwood and Jack, 2007), which see migration in the context of “modern Western colonialism” (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008,

p. 91), manifested in the political, cultural and economic controls and dominance facilitated by today’s global system. Other left-wing-inspired approaches (Chami and Fullenkamp, 2009) have also emphasised the lack of power equality related to migration:

- the fact that migrants do not have the same rights as nationals;
- that migration exacerbates the situation of underdevelopment, as remittances are mainly spent on consumption of goods produced by multinational companies originating from the “north”, thus increasing the rich countries’ exports; and
- that remittances create greater inequality in the migrants’ countries of origin.

Nevertheless, while accurately assessing the impact of migration on development at a macro level, such critical views have not engaged with the subject of agency of individuals who strive to improve their well-being, seeking the best available options under the circumstances of their lives. Also, they have not considered the impact of migration at the household and community levels, where remittances and other transnational activities may contribute to improving livelihoods.

Many years of economic and political dependency have resulted in the poorer countries’ governments aiming to reach the development level of former colonies, and in individuals identifying their own developmental goals with those of developed countries’ citizens. As individuals aspire to better livelihoods, migration becomes for them a vehicle for overcoming local inequalities, capital constraints, the lack of opportunities and deprivation stemming from the current model of capitalism (Portes, 2009). At the same time, it further contributes to increasing dependency and the development gap between the south and the north, with countries of the north benefiting from cheap and, in many cases, qualified labour, and countries from the global south experiencing labour depletion and a reduced pressure on the government to introduce structural changes that would lead to greater socioeconomic development. As postcolonial commentators have observed, migration is one of the factors allowing Western colonialism to keep control over developing countries thanks to elements of cultural, economic and political domination, and to perpetuate inequalities within and between countries (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008).

Although Colombia is not a former US colony, for a long time, it has been in an economic, political and social relation of dependency with the USA, whereby the USA

has exercised post-colonial-type pressures on Colombia to develop policies that are in accordance with Western objectives of economic and social development. In this sense, the ideal of development prevalent within the Colombian society has been constructed according to the First-World definitions and norms (Mercer *et al.*, 2003). This is important because the evaluation of socioeconomic development will depend on how it is defined. For the purposes of our discussion, we follow Sen's (1999) definition, whereby socioeconomic development is a process where people's freedoms and well-being are expanded so they can help themselves and the world. This definition also includes social changes that benefit all or most of the population of a place (Portes, 2011). Thus, it considers not only economic growth but also improvements in living standards and welfare of the population triggered by structural changes. While the traditional economics-based theories of migration were not preoccupied with the social aspect of what is considered development, it is currently generally accepted that the analysis of the impact of migration on development should not be limited to a focus on economic indicators, but should also include the ways in which migration affects the society more broadly. As an implication of adopting such a broad definition of development, it is pertinent to examine the impact of migration on the sending country at the households, community and the whole economy and society levels.

The complex influence migration exerts in the sending countries can be appraised in more detail when remittances and other transnational activities of migrants are included in the analysis (Glick Schiller *et al.*, 1992, 1995; Guarnizo, 2003). Stodolska and Almeida Santos (2006) explain that, although there is no clear understanding of what constitutes transnational activities, typically the term comprises remittances, migrant entrepreneurship, cross-border trade and travelling, political participation at home, telecommunications and knowledge and technology transfers. Some of these pursuits have a direct economic impact, whereas others are of community-oriented (e.g. development of civil society, involvement in communal projects) and political (e.g. voting, supporting political parties from abroad) nature. All those activities, albeit to varying extent, are part of international business, impacting international financial markets, international trade and multinational enterprises. Taking into account a range of transnational activities and their effects makes it possible to conceptualise development more broadly than just in economic terms. Such an approach accommodates within the definition of development various social aspects, whereby the term "social" is:

[...] interpreted in its broader sense, that is, encompassing economic, cultural, and political dimensions of change. [It] is not employed in opposition to "economic", because economic processes are seen as integral part of broader social processes (De Haas, 2010, p. 2).

Although transnationalism is not a new phenomenon, and not all migrants participate in transnational activities, new technologies of communication and transportation have modified the pace at which those activities take place, generating new impacts on globalisation processes at diverse levels (Vertovec, 2009). According to Vertovec (2009), research on transnationalism still has to cope with the need to move beyond methodological nationalism and with other methodological challenges related to the proper level (micro, meso and macro) and unit of analysis (region, countries, ethnic groups, communities and families). This paper contributes to the analyses of

transnational activities by including all three levels of analysis and adopting the migrant family as a unit of analysis.

Extant research on transnational activities of Colombian migrants

The literature on LA migration suggests that migrants' engagement in transnational activities is beneficial for their country of origin, not only at the level of the whole economy and society but also at the level of communities and households (Beard and Sarmiento, 2010; Cohen *et al.*, 2009). In relation to the Mexican case, there exist empirical studies demonstrating the involvement of migrants in the development of the country through diverse transnational activities, such as sending remittances, buying real estate and land, consuming Mexican products while in the USA, investing in farms, making telephone calls and travelling to Mexico, working with hometown associations and participating in philanthropic projects in their communities (Beard and Sarmiento, 2010; Cohen *et al.*, 2009).

However, there is little evidence of a similar trend on the part of Colombian migrants, except for money transfers. While most studies focus on analysing remittances (Cardona Sosa and Medina, 2006; Leal-Calderon, 2008) – research has also started to address other transnational activities, such as transnational entrepreneurship, philanthropic activities of Colombian emigrants in Colombia and political participation (Aysa-Lastra, 2007; Bueno, 2007; Mejia Ochoa, 2006).

Between 2001 and 2010, remittances in Colombia have grown at an annual rate of around 8 per cent (Comunidad Andina, 2011), and their values in 2011 have returned to similar numbers to those before the world recession of 2008 (Dinero.com, 2012) (Figure 1).

Remittances are sent mainly from the USA and Spain, where most Colombian emigrants live (Mejia Ochoa, 2006). Previous studies have stated that remittances are typically spent on food (26 per cent), public services (19 per cent) and health (16 per cent), while around 50 per cent of migrants save a share of those money transfers (Gaviria and Mejia, 2005). Remittances are considered to be a “safety net” for Colombian households which receive them, and which spend around 10 per cent more on education than families with no migration experience, but where expenditure on consumption, health and investment seems to be similar for both groups of families (Cardona Sosa and

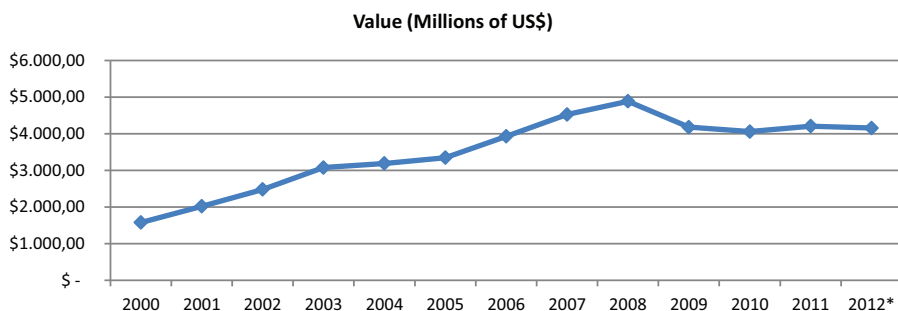


Figure 1.
Annual remittances
flow in Colombia

Source: Based on data from the World Bank (2013)

Medina, 2006). This could be seen as an indication of how, through investment in the education of future generations, remittances promote the development of the country (Kugler, 2005). On the other hand, within the literature on remittances, there are also critical views on the impact of remittances on families, communities and countries. In particular, Chami and Fullenkamp (2009) argue that at the level of households, remittances can create dependence and lack of motivation for employment, can trigger further migration of family members and can increase conspicuous consumption. At the meso level, remittances can also motivate other members of the community to migrate and can create price bubbles, therefore contributing to greater inequalities and poverty. In addition, remittances could have a damaging impact on local governments that rely on those sources of money for developing their assistance projects. While a number of problematic assumptions are implicit in Chami and Fullenkamp's (2009) view, such as staying in the country of origin is "better" than migrating and it is always more desirable to undertake employment, regardless of its kind, than to live off remittances, the argument about remittances potentially creating greater inequalities and poverty should not be ignored.

Portes *et al.* (2002) studied transnational entrepreneurship of three LA migrant groups in the USA (Salvadorians, Dominicans and Colombians), with the last group exhibiting the lowest level of transnational business activities. The research showed that those Colombians who are better connected and have lived in the USA for longer are less engaged in transnational activities. These results were confirmed by Orozco (2005) and Neira Orjuela and Giraldo Rodríguez (2006).

A similar situation occurs in the case of community remittances and philanthropic involvement of Colombian migrants, studied by Aysa-Lastra (2007) and Portes *et al.* (2005). In both articles, the authors recognise the potential of migrants to support social initiatives in Colombia, but note that their actual involvement is limited, perhaps as a consequence of the small and fragmented networks Colombians have in the USA and the lack of trust they exhibit towards institutions and individuals (Guarnizo and Díaz, 1999). On the other hand, the majority of Colombian migrants regularly engage in various transnational activities, such as sending remittances and making telephone calls to Colombia, aimed at improving their own and their direct families' situation (Gaviria and Mejia, 2005).

Studies analysing transnational political participation of Colombian migrants are scarce. Guarnizo *et al.* (2003) researched the transnational political participation of Dominicans, Salvadorans and Colombians in the USA. From the three groups studied, Colombians had the lowest levels of participation in political activities of any kind. This is explained by the authors as influenced by the unstable political context at the time the migrants left the country. Although the Colombian Government has created some strategies to link its emigrants to the country's life – such as granting them the right to vote, to hold double citizenship and to have congressional representation – their political participation remains low (Bueno, 2007).

Furthermore, few studies have addressed the investment of Colombian emigrants inside the country of origin (Guarnizo and Díaz, 1999; Mejia Ochoa, 2006; Portes *et al.*, 2002). The results of the analysis of how migrants invest in Colombia depend on whether the definition of investment includes only foreign direct investment (FDI) or also other forms of investment. Because this paper adopts a broader understanding of socioeconomic development, we see the category of investment as including FDI along

with other forms of capital spending that incorporate dimensions of change at the socioeconomic level, for example, education and health. Those dimensions are also affected by the remittances received by families. The use of remittances by recipient families is depicted in Figure 2.

The data provided in Figure 2 allow us to determine that remittances can impact the investments made by migrants in Colombia. The impact of those investments on the socioeconomic development of the country has not so far been addressed by academic research.

For a better understanding of the Colombian context from migrants' perspective, it is also important to consider the activities the national government has developed to include the migrants in the country's projects. The government has taken initiatives to strengthen the relations with its migrants, based on the creation of an integral migratory policy. The policy is coordinated and managed by Colombia Nos Une programme[1], whose work focuses on five specific areas:

- (1) service system to Colombians abroad;
- (2) returning plan;
- (3) promotion of regular and organised migration;
- (4) connections to famous Colombians living abroad; and
- (5) foreign community plan.

Within those areas, diverse strategies have been developed to enhance migrants' involvement in national life, mainly through creating virtual networks in each area to connect migrants with residents and institutions, to promote real estate fairs, to motivate migrants to set up retirement and health plans in Colombia, to support returning migrants in their relocation efforts, to negotiate agreements to enhance migration management, to promote local artists abroad and to promote Colombian

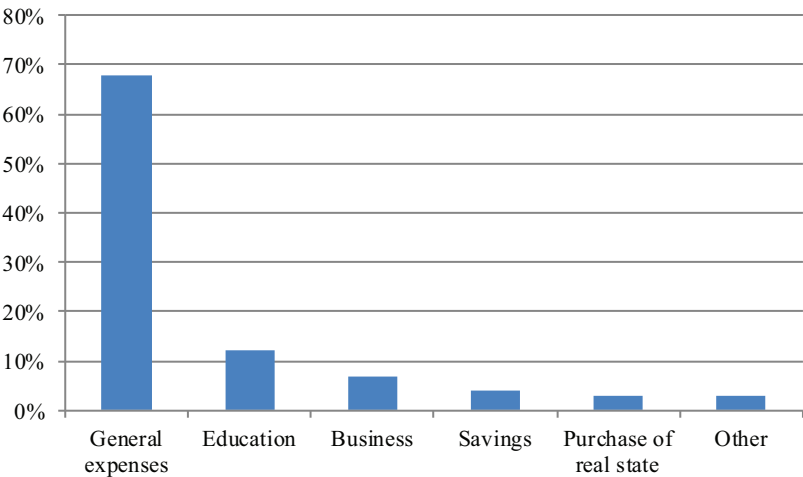


Figure 2.
Use of remittances
by recipient families
in Colombia

Source: Based on data from the FOMIN-IDB (2004)

identity within migrant communities. Nevertheless, most of the government's activities have been directed towards the purchasing of real estate and improving the remittances' financial markets. No other structural changes have been made to encourage and support the international business activities of migrants.

Methodology

We have analysed empirical data obtained from nine focus groups conducted with migrants and their families, with a total participation of 27 families. In addition, five interviews were conducted with two governmental officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Proexport (The Colombian Agency for Export and investment promotion in the country), an expert from the Colombian Central Bank and an expert on Colombian migration research. (Please see [Table I](#) for more information about the sample).

Following [Summerfield \(2007\)](#), purposeful and snowball qualitative sampling techniques were used, due to the fact that not all migrants were legally established in the USA, and also because of the diverse reasons that motivated them to migrate. The number of cases analysed was determined using saturation procedures ([Eisenhardt, 1991](#)). The participant families lived in different places (mainly Atlanta, various cities in Florida, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and other locations), and were originally from various Colombian regions such as Barranquilla, Bogotá, Medellín and Pereira. They represented diverse social status and family configurations, and different extents of engagement in transnational activities.

During the focus groups, semi-structured open questions were used, and the material was collected and transcribed verbatim in Spanish. The data were analysed using content analysis tools ([Miles and Huberman, 1994](#)), supported by the use of qualitative analysis software Atlas TI. Following the approach recommended by [Yin \(2003\)](#), Excel files were created to organise the data by themes related to transnational activities, to facilitate the analysis of the responses. Once formatted, the data were transferred to the Atlas TI software for further analysis, for which axial coding was used ([Shenton, 2004](#)) to establish possible relations and patterns. The results were compared with the data obtained from context-oriented interviews and secondary sources. The latter included policy papers presented at relevant symposia and conferences such as the 12th Annual International Business Research Forum: "Diaspora investment and entrepreneurship: the role of people, their movements, and capital in the international economy" (The Fox School of Business, 15 October 2011, Philadelphia, USA), Mi Casa con Remesas (Country Club de Ejecutivos, 2nd August 2010, Medellín, Colombia), Seminario Oportunidades Humanas y Medicion de la Pobreza en Colombia (Universidad EAFIT, 6 June 2010, Medellín, Colombia), Perspectivas económicas de América Latina 2010 enfocado en el papel de la migración internacional y de las remesas en el fomento del desarrollo (OECD and Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 13th April 2010, Bogotá, Colombia), Migración internacional, retos y oportunidades para el desarrollo (Comfenalco, 10 March 2010, Medellín, Colombia)[2].

To generate rich insights into the transnational activities of Colombian migrants and their underlying reasons, we adopted a qualitative approach. As [Datta \(2009\)](#) argues, qualitative methods need to be used in research that aims to capture both the reasons behind migrants' activities and their impacts at the micro, meso and macro levels. The adopted methodology has allowed us to take into account the unique conditions related

Table I.
Demographic profile
of participants

| Family group | Participant pseudonym | Gender | Age range (years) | Education level | Years living abroad | Place of destination | Social status before departure | Main reason to migrate |
|--------------|-----------------------|--------|-------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Luis | Male | 50-60 | High school | 14 | New York | Medium-Medium | Opportunity |
| | Maria | Female | 45-50 | Undergraduate degree | 16 | New York | Medium-Medium | Study |
| | Juan | Male | 15-20 | Middle school | 6 | New York | Medium-Medium | Opportunity |
| 2 | Jose | Male | 50-60 | Middle School | 10 | Connecticut | Medium-Low | Economic |
| | Clara | Female | 50-60 | Middle school | 1 | Connecticut | Medium-Low | Economic |
| | Pedro | Male | 30-35 | High School | 1 | Connecticut | Medium-Low | Economic |
| 3 | Lina | Female | 30-35 | Undergraduate degree | 8 | Miami | Medium-Medium | Opportunity |
| | Lucas | Male | 30-35 | Undergraduate degree | 8 | Miami | Medium-Medium | Opportunity |
| 4 | Carlos | Male | 35-40 | Undergraduate degree | 6 | Miami | Medium-High | Job offer |
| | Ana | Female | 35-40 | Undergraduate degree | 6 | Miami | Medium-High | Job offer |
| 5 | Eliza | Female | 20-25 | Undergraduate degree | 1 | Miami | Medium-High | Job offer |
| | Andres | Male | 30-35 | Undergraduate degree | 5 | Miami | Medium-High | Investment opportunity |
| | Diana | Female | 30-35 | Undergraduate degree | 28 | Miami | Medium-High | Mother migrated |
| 6 | Nora | Female | 50-60 | High school | 29 | Miami | Medium-Medium | Husband migrated |
| 7 | Isabel | Female | 20-25 | Undergraduate degree | 4 | Miami | Medium-Medium | Job offer |
| 8 | Esteban | Male | 30-35 | Master | 9 | Charlotte | Medium-High | Study |
| 9 | Valentina | Female | 30-35 | Master | 5 | Charlotte | Medium-High | Study |
| | Rita | Female | 25-30 | High school | 4 | Miami-Kentucky | Low | Job offer |
| 10 | Victor | Male | 25-30 | High school | 1 | Miami | Low | Wife migrated |
| | Paula | Female | 25-30 | College degree | 10 | New York | Medium-Medium | Father migrated |
| 11 | Claudia | Female | 25-30 | College degree | 10 | New York | Medium-Medium | Father migrated |
| | Fabiola | Female | 50-60 | Undergraduate degree | 11 | New Jersey | High | Security |
| 12 | Bernardo | Male | 60-70 | Undergraduate degree | 45 | New Jersey | Medium-Medium | Opportunity |
| 13 | Marta | Female | 60-70 | Undergraduate degree | 42 | New Jersey | High | Husband migrated |
| | Adriana | Female | 45-50 | Middle school | 9 | Orlando | Medium-Low | Economic and security |
| 14 | Marcela | Female | 45-50 | Undergraduate degree | 11 | New York | High | Economic and security |
| 15 | Camilo | Male | 50-60 | Master | 30 | New York | High | Opportunity |

(continued)

| Family group | Participant pseudonym | Gender | Age range (years) | Education level | Years living abroad | Place of destination | Social status before departure | Main reason to migrate |
|--------------|-----------------------|--------|-------------------|----------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| 16 | Juana | Female | 40-45 | Undergraduate degree | 9 | Orlando | Medium-High | Economic |
| 17 | Gabriel | Male | 40-45 | Undergraduate degree | 9 | Orlando | Medium-High | Economic |
| | Nina | Female | 50-60 | High school | 33 | Orlando | Medium-High | Study |
| 18 | Nestor | Male | 50-60 | High school | 32 | Orlando | Medium-Low | Opportunity |
| | Lorena | Female | 50-60 | High school | 40 | Orlando | Medium-High | Husband' migrated |
| 19 | Kelly | Female | 35-40 | Master | 12 | New York | High | Security |
| 20 | Yolima | Female | 35-40 | Undergraduate degree | 6 | Atlanta | Medium-Medium | Company transfer |
| 21 | Jean | Male | 35-40 | Undergraduate degree | 6 | Atlanta | Medium-Medium | Husband's transfer |
| | Rafael | Male | 40-45 | Postgraduate studies | 14 | Atlanta | Medium-Medium | Partner migrated |
| 22 | Ricardo | Male | 40-45 | Undergraduate degree | 14 | Atlanta | Medium-Medium | Economic |
| | Ariana | Female | 25-30 | Undergraduate degree | 5 | Atlanta | Medium-Medium | Husband migrated |
| 23 | Aron | Male | 25-30 | Undergraduate degree | 12 | Atlanta | Medium-Medium | Parents migrated |
| | Sebastian | Male | 35-40 | PhD | 13 | Atlanta | High | Investment opportunity |
| 24 | Cristina | Female | 35-40 | Undergraduate degree | 8 | Atlanta | Medium-Medium | Family reunification |
| 25 | Clarisa | Female | 35-40 | Master | 13 | Atlanta | Medium-High | Study |
| 26 | Darla | Female | 30-35 | Undergraduate degree | 6 | Atlanta | Medium-High | Husband's transfer |
| 27 | Helen | Female | 35-40 | Undergraduate degree | 12 | Atlanta | Medium-Medium | Husband migrated |
| | Mateo | Male | 35-40 | Master | 2 | Miami | Medium-High | Work |
| Government | Luisa | Female | 50-60 | Doctorate | 12 | Miami | High | Work |
| Government | Cecilia | Female | 25-30 | Undergraduate degree | – | Bogota | Medium-High | – |
| Expert | Diego | Male | 40-50 | PhD | – | Medellin | Medium-High | – |
| Expert | Carmen | Female | 50-60 | PhD | – | Bogota | Medium-High | Study |

Source: Own elaboration of the authors

Table I.

to the migrant, family, region and country characteristics, which could not have been considered through the application of econometrics-based or other quantitative methods.

Transnational activities of Colombian migrants

Remittances

In line with other studies (Cardona Sosa and Medina, 2006; Gaviria and Mejia, 2005), remittances are the most common transnational activity of Colombian migrants. All but six families have stated that they send monetary remittances to family members living in Colombia. The money is usually sent to the migrants' parents who tend to take care of the migrants' children. Monetary remittances are usually complemented by gifts sent to family and friends in Colombia, which typically include clothes, toys, computers and sports equipment. Once the money has reached Colombia, it is typically the recipient who decides how to use it.

The amounts sent vary, but, on average, the amounts reported by our participants are similar to the ones found in previous studies (Gaviria and Mejia, 2005), i.e. between US\$150 and 250 per month. The Colombian Government has recognised the importance of remittances as a source of income for families within the country, and has worked with the local financial system to facilitate monetary transfers and reduce their costs. Also, it has supported the development of real estate fairs in the USA to motivate migrants to invest their remittances in real estate in Colombia.

Remittances have become an important source of income for recipient families, and represent the opportunity for them to have a presence at home even if physically they are away. As explained by Isabel:

I send remittances and gifts because since I am not there, I want them to feel my presence in my family, to feel like I am there even if I'm not.

In some cases, remittances have become an obligation for the migrant, who, through sending them, demonstrates commitment to caring for "home" even when being away:

If you are going to be away and the family will be split [...] and not helping them [...] it is complicated [...], it doesn't make any sense to be away if you cannot help them. (Ana)

Sending remittances is an activity through which individuals exercise their agency: migrants decide how much, how often and what to send, depending on their and their family's circumstances. It does not require an extended community link or a network. While being a micro-level activity, remittances are shaped by the structures surrounding the migrant, as the cost of sending, restrictions on the amount sent and the perception of the environment at home affect the amount sent and its frequency. For Colombian migrants in the USA, the cost of sending money has decreased over the years, increasing the amount available to recipients (Orozco, 2002).

At the *micro level* of individuals and households, the impact of remittances has, according to our participants, been beneficial, bringing about an improved socioeconomic situation of recipient families. Remittances have allowed migrants' families to increase their everyday expenses, as well as their spending on education, and even, savings and real estate. This accomplishment is frequently a source of pride and satisfaction to the senders:

I send money for them and money as savings for my future [...] I told my mother we would buy a house with that money, so she wouldn't have to pay rent again. I bought her first apartment [...] then I sold that one and I bought her another one, a better one [...] I was the one who had my mom living in her own house. (Luis)

Our findings indicate that, when considered at a *micro level*, remittances enhance migrants' sense of belonging and contribute to increasing their families' standards of living in Colombia, even if some migrants worry about the possible harmful impact remittances could have on their families, such as dependence on the money transferred from abroad, a result consistent with other studies (Zapata Martínez, 2009). As Eliza comments:

Well it becomes like an obligation. If people here don't send the money [...] they become dependent anyway, because when you can't send the money they get angry at you [...].

However, the data do not suggest that Colombian migrants' remittances have any impact at the *meso level* of the community and the *macro level* of the nation.

Those families that do not send remittances have explained that they do not transfer money to Colombia because their families do not need the money, and also because they do not have nuclear family members living in Colombia. Where this is the case, however, sometimes they send in-kind remittances to other relatives and friends.

Philanthropy, communal activities and involvement in non-governmental organisations
Similar to the findings of other studies (Aysa-Lastra, 2007), participation in philanthropy and communal activities, as well as supporting non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is not widespread amongst our participants. Due to the low level of these activities, their impact at both the *meso level* of the community and the *macro level* of the country has so far been limited. Beyond exceptional occasions when some migrants joined efforts to send money or material goods after a natural disaster had affected their region, as was also found by Portes *et al.* (2006), the culture of giving is not ingrained in Colombian migrants, in contrast to, for example, migrants from El Salvador and Mexico (Orozco, 2003). In the case of natural disasters, Colombians tend to send aid through recognised international organisations, such as the Red Cross:

We just made a donation because of the raining season effects in Colombia [...] we all gave some money in the office [...] every person gives some money, the owner matches the amount and we send it to the Red Cross. (Lina)

Most migrants admit they do not have information about NGOs or organisations through which they could participate in philanthropic activities, or they lack the interest to participate in them. A commonly mentioned reason is also the lack of trust in institutions engaged in those activities (Aysa-Lastra, 2007). Migrants fear that their support will not reach those in real need, but might get lost in the process, or might end in others people's hands.

Only five of the participants have belonged to or supported hometown associations, and only one remains active. This is consistent with previous observations made by Portes *et al.* (2006), who explained that Colombian migrants are not a cohesive group, but tend to act in isolation and have fragmented and closed networks, which, in turn, affect their potential for engaging in collective actions, especially those of a transnational

nature. This was noted by one of the participants who, when asked about belonging to Colombian associations, replied:

We are [...] hard on each other [...] we are disorganized and trouble making [...] especially when drinking. (Carlos)

One of the families studied owns a company in Colombia, and through the company they sometimes make personal donations to individuals. They prefer not to use any organisation as an intermediary, but to give directly to those who need help:

I think that if you donate USD\$15 to an organization, USD\$10 of the fifteen will go to the bureaucratic expenses of that organization, to pay the salaries to its employees, the rent, trips, and what is left gets to the one that really needed the money. And there are many needs in Colombia and all the donated money should reach those who need it. [If] I can donate mattresses or bed sheets, I feel much better if I know I gave them directly to those who required them, and not that they are still in a warehouse where they can get stolen, lost or damaged. (Andres)

Similar to remittances, the philanthropic activities of Colombian migrants are thus more individually than collectively oriented. The impacts of these activities at the family, community and national levels are beneficial in the sense that they result in an improvement of a situation otherwise unaddressed by individuals, organisations and especially the state, whose duty it is to support its local communities.

However, the empirical material suggests that Colombian migrants might be willing to offer their help. If the organisations and the government manage to increase the migrants' trust towards their activities, the engagement of migrants in philanthropy and other community-oriented programmes might increase. To date, however, although the government has joined efforts with some local organisations to stimulate the participation of migrants in those programmes, such as *Conexión Colombia* (2011), this has not triggered changes at the *macro level*, as the structural problems of corruption and the lack of transparency that are at the root of migrants' mistrust have not been addressed.

Cross-border trade, travel, tourism and telecommunication

Cross-border and nostalgic trade, as well as travel, tourism and telecommunication, are means by which migrants deepen their ties with the home country (Orozco, 2003). When asked about the consumption of Colombian products in the USA, all of our participants have mentioned how easy it is for them to access these products nowadays, compared to the past. Most of the Colombian products they consume are bought in supermarkets or specialised stores:

Almost once a month we go to the supermarket where Latin products are sold, and we usually buy arepas, chorizos, morcilla, Colombian sodas, arequipe, things like that. (Valentina)

None of the participants were importers or distributors of Colombian products in the USA. It is difficult to measure the amount of money spent on these products, as most participants buy them as part of the general grocery purchasing for the household. The demand for those products is also identified by Orozco (2008), who calculated that those expenses constitute around US\$1,000 a year per person.

Travelling to Colombia is directly related to the legal status of a migrant in the USA. Those legally living in the USA tend to travel to Colombia at least once every year, with

some travelling three or four times, mainly to visit relatives and friends. “Illegal” migrants cannot travel back to their country of origin. In the case of two families, migrants also travel for business reasons:

I travel almost every two months, for business, but I try to mix it with family visits, too.
(Andres)

No other reasons for travel were provided by the participants, which imply that going on vacation to places other than where their relatives live is not common. Therefore, at present, Colombian migrants’ visits to their country of origin have little impact on the *macro level* of the economy, i.e. in relation to Colombia’s overall revenues from tourism, and likewise on the *meso level* of socioeconomic development of regions other than those individual migrants come from (Newland and Taylor, 2012). Through purchasing Colombian products and travelling to Colombia, migrants exercise their agency within the places of departure and destination, while the surrounding structure becomes, at least to a small extent, modified by their consumption patterns. In this sense, an impact on the development at the *meso level* of migrants’ communities of origin can be observed, as, for example, local markets sell more Colombian products, and more transportation routes are created to facilitate migrants’ movements between the USA and their home towns.

The volume of transnational communication between migrants and residents in Colombia is difficult to measure in monetary terms. There exist many possibilities to communicate, for example, through using services of different telecommunication companies, Internet communications, calling cards and services available free of charge. Our participants universally state that regular calls to their relatives living in the home country are an important form of communication.

Calls tend to be made several times a week or even daily, mostly taking advantage of low-cost services using broadband connection, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

We all talk every day on the phone, we all have a special package, like a line you connect to your Internet. So I connect the phone, it is like a local call, all they have to do is to have the computer and the Internet on [...] and then we can talk. (Lina)

The motivations behind and effects of calls can be identified mainly at the *micro level* of individuals and families. Their impacts are, according to our participants, beneficial: calls allow migrants to keep in touch with their families and friends, and enable them to retain some level of presence in their place of origin. This transnational activity has existed for a long time, but the facilities and reduced costs of today’s telecommunication services have considerably increased the volume and duration of the calls.

While the data do not offer insights into the impact of phone calls at the *meso level* of the community, considered at the *macro level* of the nation, international calls could represent an increase in service exports (calling services) by local companies. Yet, the telecommunications market is dominated by multinationals from developed countries, especially by American Internet providers. According to the [USA Federal Communication Commission \(2014\)](#), Colombia is the fifth market for international paid calls made from the USA, with most of the revenues from this market going to US-based companies. The transnational telecommunication of Colombian migrants thus constitutes a factor contributing to the dependency of the global south on the north. Even though this kind of transnational activity has a favourable effect at the *micro level* of Colombian migrants and their families, the government’s investment

in telecommunications technology and infrastructure would be necessary for it to have a beneficial impact on the country's development at the *macro level*.

On the other hand, buying Colombian products in the USA and travelling regularly to Colombia could have a valuable impact at the household, community and national levels. At the *micro level*, these activities allow families to strengthen their cohesiveness. At the *meso level*, they can create income for local companies and communities in Colombia, and, at the same time, they can contribute to the nation's development at the *macro level*, through indirect taxes, increases in foreign exchange and exports. Because migrants' participation in tourism is low, there is scope for the government and businesses to motivate them to engage in tourism activities, with benefit for the country's economy. Overall, the transnational movements of Colombian migrants coupled with their consumption of Colombian products in the USA could potentially be beneficial for development at all levels of analysis, but to strengthen their impacts, *macro-level* changes to the structural constraints of legal regulations restricting the flow of people and trade between the two countries would need to be introduced.

Political participation

Among the participants, there is no evidence of engagement in political activities either in Colombia, or in the USA, confirming earlier findings of [Guarnizo and Diaz \(1999\)](#). Our participants state that they do not belong to Colombian political parties, and none of them contributes financially to political campaigns. Their lack of engagement in Colombian politics tends to be primarily motivated by the lack of interest:

I have not done anything in politics, maybe because of the lack of interest and time. (Nora)

In line with previous studies ([Mejia Ochoa, 2006](#)), it is clear that Colombians living in the USA are not interested in political activities in either their home country or the USA. This might be related to the environment in the country of origin, as the continuous social problems and political turbulence can motivate the emigrants to find other, again, individual-oriented ways of participating in their home country's life, cultivating connections with relatives but not with institutions or the government through associations or political activity.

Even if migrants are aware of their right to vote, only nine individuals have done so. Although migrants also have the right to a representative in the Congress, their impact has not been significant, as one of our expert interviewees explains:

[Migrants'] participation is minimal, small enough to not interfere with the final result if one or other candidate gets the majority of the votes [...] however, I'm sure that every political party has a lobbyist in the USA trying to persuade migrants to vote for their candidates, although I don't think this is making a real difference. (Diego)

The lack of trust amongst Colombians, and particularly, the perceived high level of corruption in the government, discourages some of the potential participants from engaging in political activities. Most Colombians consider the country they left as troubled by political problems, and they do not want to be associated with those types of activities. As a result of the lack of political participation, there is no direct impact at the *micro level* of households, the *meso level* of community and the *macro level* of the nation.

On the contrary, the outcome of the lack of political participation can be seen as detrimental to cohesion among migrant groups, and to lobbying in favour of Colombia in the USA. This, in turn, can be considered a factor contributing to perpetuation of

unequal power relations between the two nations (Banerjee and Prasad, 2008; Chami and Fullenkamp, 2009). To alter this situation, government's effort in this direction and possibly a structural change would be necessary.

Investment, migrant entrepreneurship and knowledge and technology transfers

When asked about their investment activities in Colombia, the participants commonly mentioned purchasing real estate, be it for their own use, for their relatives or for rent. According to one of the experts interviewed, real estate has become a method of saving money for the middle class in Colombia:

Middle class citizens in Colombia are not typically thinking of investing in the stock market, or in treasury bills. What they do think about is buying a house [...] In case they don't plan to return, anyway they can guarantee some sort of financial support for their children or any person depending on them in Colombia. (Diego)

According to our data, all of the participants who had the opportunity and the means to purchase property in Colombia have done so, even if they have not thought of returning. This confirms Gaviria and Mejia's (2005) findings, suggesting that buying property in Colombia is of paramount importance for the migrants, to save money and to reduce income and wealth risk in the future. In the real estate fairs conducted from 2005 to 2008 with the support of the Colombian Government, participants conducted transactions valued at US\$140.8mn (El Kareh, 2008). In this sense, investment in Colombian property makes an impact on the *micro level*, contributing to improvement of the situation of individuals and their families.

Only two families have created businesses in Colombia, but only one of them was set up as a result of the migration experience. This was the case with a distribution company, where products from the USA, and now also from Asia, are sold in Colombia. The other business cited is a hotel. However, it is neither specifically targeted at international travellers nor does it constitute the principal activity of the owners in the USA. Although both businesses generate income for the migrant families, their operations do not involve, for example, advanced knowledge and technology transfers from the USA to Colombia. Nevertheless, previous experiences and learning obtained at a personal level have been important in deciding what kind of business to establish, as one of the participants said, turning to his wife:

Life is odd, right? Do you remember how I used to go to the restaurant where you worked, and there was a bathroom there where I used to sell my watches? [...] And now I'm working on something really similar. (Luis)

In terms of knowledge or technology transfer, some participants stated that they have learned "new ways of doing things" that could be implemented in Colombia to improve some processes, but, so far, they have not acted on this new knowledge, either because they do not see how they could initiate this or because they are not interested in doing so. There is no evidence of high-level technological transfers either.

Even though Colombian migrants are among the group of migrants in the USA with higher education levels than the average education level of Colombians back in the country of origin, they usually do not work in high-tech jobs or highly cognitive demanding jobs (Medina and Posso, 2009). Thus, they often do not have the opportunity to develop the expertise and technological knowledge that could subsequently be transferred to Colombia. Particularly, female migrants often work in stereotypical

“female” jobs usually in low-paid positions in the services industry (mostly cleaning), given their lack of knowledge of English and their fragmented networks to which they can turn for help with childcare while they work. Those jobs enable them to gain income to survive, but prevent them from exercising their full capacities (Carlisle, 2006) while contributing to marginalisation of female migrants.

The least explored topic in relation to transnational investment is the participation of migrants in the Colombian stock market. Among the participant families, two in particular mentioned investments in this sector, with one of them having little knowledge about the stock market but with interest in investing some savings in it for the future. An important consideration is the local environment of Colombia for investment – in particular, the amount of capital needed by the migrant to invest in productive ventures inside the country. As one of the government officials states:

In comparison with other groups, investment activities are not very high for Colombian emigrants. Colombian emigrants usually come from a middle class that is being formed in Colombia, but they don't have the economic base needed to invest in Colombia in a big company. This is different from other migrants like Jamaicans, who work more in groups, and besides the capital needed to invest in Colombia is three times higher than the capital needed by Jamaicans to invest in Jamaica. Colombian migrants work and invest to achieve and keep a financial stability for their families. (Luisa)

Both the insufficiency of capital and the fact that Colombians do not usually act as a group, can affect their potential for securing business partners with whom to create businesses in Colombia. Besides, as noted by Seoyun and Manyak (2009), to attract foreign investment and migrants' investment in particular, it would also be necessary to improve the structural conditions underpinning investment, namely, the public and private transparency levels. At present, the lack of trust towards each other and towards Colombian institutions makes migrants hesitant about getting involved in major investment ventures.

To summarise, the social and economic development of migrant families can be improved by the possibility of property ownership, and, in some cases, the chance to own a small business that can provide a certain amount of income for the family left in Colombia. In this sense, the investment activities of Colombian migrants are beneficial for the socioeconomic development considered at the *micro level* of individuals and households. However, beyond the purchase of real estate, larger investments in entrepreneurial activities are limited because of the lack of capital and/or knowledge, as well as an aversion to risk.

At the *meso-community level*, investments made in house improvements and local businesses can improve access to services for non-migrant families, while creating a small amount of jobs and a better living environment. However, at the *macro level* of the nation, the impacts are mixed. Investing in real estate, where most investments are made, can create jobs while generating a price bubble. Also, such investments do not involve knowledge and technology transfers, and, as such, represent a “brain loss” (Beine *et al.*, 2001; Medina and Posso, 2009;) rather than a “brain gain” or “circulation” outcome of migration (Kotabe *et al.*, 2013; Saxenian, 2005). Investment in bigger companies is low and limited. Likewise, participation in the stock market is low amongst Colombian migrants.

The Colombian Government would need to change the structures underlying investment conditions in the country to increase migrant participation in this kind of

transnational activities. This would involve providing migrants with greater access to financial resources to reduce capital constraints, motivating them to participate in the stock market, stimulating business network creation, reducing risk for investors, encouraging technological and knowledge transfers and improving the perception of Colombian institutions among migrants. In addition, the government would need to work towards facilitating “know how” and not just “know that” transfers, channelling them into social knowledge to benefit the country in general (Mir *et al.*, 2010). So far, the government has launched some programmes to enhance migrants’ investment in Colombia, focusing on promoting real estate fairs, creating channels for migrants to invest in national health and retirement plans and working with financial institutions to facilitate the purchase of real estate and money transfers at lower costs. Also, the government has organised virtual conferences on diverse topics to stimulate technology and knowledge transfers and put in contact migrants and residents who can share common interests. However, none of these has generated structural changes to the local environment.

Concluding discussion

In this paper, we have contributed to the debate on the migration–development nexus by exploring the reasons behind and the extent of engagement of Colombian migrants in the USA in transnational activities, and their actual and potential impact on the socioeconomic development at the micro, meso and macro levels. In doing this, we have taken into account the characteristics of the migrants and the structural conditions underpinning their transnational activities.

In the case of Colombian migrants in the USA, the structure and local context at the time of departure have led them to participating mainly in transnational activities that are individually oriented, such as sending remittances and gifts, making calls to relatives living in Colombia, travelling to their place of origin to visit relatives and investing in houses or small businesses to support the financial stability of their families. Transnational activities of a collective nature, such as participating in political activities, hometown associations and philanthropic projects, or investing in bigger ventures, are limited. This limited participation in collective activities is directly affected by the lack of trust of Colombian migrants towards institutions and towards each other, by the lack of interest in institutional actions, and by the unstable political situation at the time of departure.

Transnational activities of Colombian migrants have, in the first place, a positive impact on the socioeconomic development at the *micro level* of households. As our study has shown, they contribute to an improvement of the situation of the migrants and their families back in Colombia. However, the assessment of the impact of these activities on development at other levels of analysis is problematic: in most cases, their impact at the *meso level* of communities is either limited or mixed, and they do not lead to changes at the *macro level* of the nation. They can therefore be seen as contributing to perpetuation of the current conditions of inequality between Colombia and the USA or, more broadly, between the global South and North.

From an international business perspective, a type of transnational activity of particular importance is migrant entrepreneurship and investment. As has been highlighted in our analysis, most of the entrepreneurial projects undertaken by Colombian emigrants have had a very limited impact on the country’s economic and

social development. Critical literature on international business has argued that north–south business transactions have been a means to maintain dependency, due to the presence of multinationals operating in the south whose headquarters are located in the developed north (Guedes and Faria, 2010). Our findings indicate that, in the case of Colombia, the low level of migrants’ transnational entrepreneurial activities, and their marginal role – due to the underlying political and economic structures – as actors involved in international business transactions, further exacerbate this situation.

For this to change, the Colombian Government would need to include Colombian emigrants in its entrepreneurship programmes and to motivate them to engage in more advanced entrepreneurial activities. The government should concentrate on launching projects directed towards its emigrants, motivating them to invest in Colombia, to create companies, transfer skills, engage in transnational pursuits and to support innovation and entrepreneurship within the country. In this context, it is necessary to acknowledge the important role networks play in transnational entrepreneurship. Our analysis shows that Colombians’ networks are small, fragmented and closed. Even though networks are formed by individuals, the government could promote, through programmes such as Colombia Nos Une, the generation of spaces to facilitate the establishment of networking spaces, where individuals sharing common interests could meet and initiate business partnerships. Without structural changes and government policies supporting migrants’ transnational business activities, it will not be possible for migration to contribute to the country’s development and to reduce the economic dependency of Colombia on the USA.

Our findings indicate that migrants spontaneously engage in “development from below” (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998), with the benefit for their own families and, in some cases, the local communities. However, the initiatives undertaken by the government have not been aimed at addressing any of the structural issues facing Colombia on its trajectory towards a higher level of socioeconomic development. Problems such as corruption, lack of trust in institutions and fear of being associated with violence still prevent migrants from investing and forming entrepreneurial ventures in Colombia. As a consequence, even if the transnational activities of Colombian migrants have contributed to an improvement of the socioeconomic situation of families and, to some degree, have also led to improvements at the community level, they have not contributed to changing the general dependency structure Colombia is part of.

Our research has also demonstrated how in exercising their agency, migrants are constrained by postcolonial structures, within which their efforts to enhance their livelihoods do not generate a structural transformation in the society and economy that would benefit the masses (Kurekova, 2010). Ultimately, then, the transnational activities of migrants are part of the broader economic, political and cultural processes through which the north exercises control over the global south. As long as the government does not change its local environment and institutions, the uneven relation between the USA and Colombia will not be challenged.

Global structures of geopolitical inequality have impacted the local environment of less developed countries, motivating some people to migrate to places where they can achieve the standards of socioeconomic development prevalent in Western societies. Therefore, migrants settle in countries of the north, where they seek personal benefits, while the uneven distribution of wealth in the world remains the same. As demonstrated by our study, while migration contributes to socioeconomic development at the *micro*

level of individuals and families, it does not constitute a solution to the problems of development at the *meso level* of communities and the *macro level* of the nation. The governments of developing countries such as Colombia must embark on deep structural changes that can create socioeconomic conditions needed to improve the livelihoods and welfare of all or the majority of the population.

Future studies should focus on other empirical cases, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data generation, and addressing specific geographical contexts within Latin America. Our study has provided insights into the importance of considering the environment in which Colombian migrants live, and to the level of analysis (micro, meso or macro) discussed when studying the impact of transnational activities on the socioeconomic development of the country of origin. However, more research is needed:

- first, to obtain a greater amount of empirical evidence; and
- second, to enrich our knowledge of transnational activities through comparative studies.

This paper also underlines the importance of including in research diverse actors in international business, especially through taking into account not only multinational companies, but also, other stakeholders such as migrants and governments, whose operations and strategies affect international business activities in the contemporary globalised world. We have pointed to the different ways in which the transnational activities of migrants constitute international business endeavours, as they directly and indirectly impact international investment, finance, trade, tourism and other business organisations. The volume of each activity might be smaller than those of multinationals, but their overall volume and complexity make them a topic worthy of scholarly interest. Therefore, the transnational pursuits of migrants should not be neglected by international business scholars. This paper makes a contribution to extant literature through linking issues related to migration, transnationalism and development within Latin America, and specifically in Colombia, with discussions about international business in this geographical and socioeconomic context.

Notes

1. [Programme created by the Colombian Government to link Colombians' emigrants and make them subjects of public policy] ([Colombia Nos Une, 2013](#)).
2. [Translation: Mi Casa con Remesas [My House with Remittances], Seminario Oportunidades Humanas y Medición de la Pobreza en Colombia [Human Opportunities and Poverty Measurement in Colombia Seminar], Perspectivas económicas de América Latina 2010: papel de la migración internacional y de las remesas en el fomento del desarrollo [Economic Perspectives of Latin America 2010: International Migration and remittances' role in fostering development], Migración internacional, retos y oportunidades para el desarrollo [International Migration, challenges and opportunities for development]].

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