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Social Remittances Revisited

Peggy Levitt and Deepak Lamba-Nieves

In this article we revisit the concept of social remittances. First, we show how people's experiences before migrating strongly influence what they do in the countries where they settle; this, in turn, affects what they remit back to their homelands. Second, just as scholars differentiate between individual and collective economic remittances, we also distinguish between individual and collective social remittances. While individuals communicate ideas and practices to each other in their roles as friends, family members or neighbours, they also communicate in their capacity as organisational actors, which has implications for organisational management and capacity-building. Finally, we argue that social remittances can scale up from local-level impacts to affect regional and national change and scale out to affect other domains of practice.

Keywords: Social Remittances; Transnational Migration; Immigration; Globalisation; Remittances; Development

Introduction

Despite decades of scholarship, the jury is still out on the relationship between migration and development (Newland 2007). Migrants from the developing world bring labour, skills and know-how to the countries where they settle, while continuing to contribute to development in their countries of origin by sending remittances, investing in businesses, introducing knowledge and skills and contributing to charity (de Haas 2006; Ruttan 2008). But not everything is rosy. In some cases, migration also heightens economic dependency and inequality, creates unrealistic expectations for a standard of living that is unsustainable on its own, and exacerbates conflicts between competing and increasingly unequal groups. Clearly, migration's impact varies by country and group, over time, and according to whether remittances are used individually or collectively.

Peggy Levitt is Professor of Sociology at Wellesley College and Co-Director of the Transnational Studies Initiative, Harvard University. Correspondence to: Prof. P. Levitt, Dept of Sociology, Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley MA, 02481, USA. E-mail: plevitt@wellesley.edu. Deepak Lamba-Nieves is Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a Non-Resident Senior Scholar at the Center for the New Economy in Puerto Rico. E-mail: deepakln@mit.edu

Most debates about migration and development privilege the economic at the expense of the social. Migrant remittances and philanthropic transfers amount to US\$338 billion a year globally—nearly twice the amount of official development assistance (World Bank 2009). International aid agencies and governments are hard at work designing policies to tap into and purposefully channel these resources (Wilmaladharma *et al.* 2004). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that many scholars and policy-makers hail remittances as the next development panacea (Orozco 2002; Ratha 2005).

But economics is not the whole story. Culture permeates all aspects of the development enterprise—as a challenge and an opportunity. Migrants carry ideas, practices and narratives which enable mobility and different forms of membership and belonging. Culture also strongly influences how development goals are established, the policies put in place to achieve them, and how successfully they are achieved. By privileging the economic, researchers and policy-makers overlook an important potential aid and/or barrier to project success (Rao and Woolcock 2007). By treating culture as a residual value, or by suggesting that it cannot be studied scientifically, we also risk promoting policies that fail to take into account key aspects of the social worlds we hope to improve (Lamont and Small 2008).

This article is part of recent efforts to bring culture back into migration debates. Doing so requires not only looking at the ‘migration of culture’ (or religion, ideas, political attitudes and artistic practices) but also seeing *migration as a cultural act*. Because migrants’ identities and actions are rich in cultural and social meaning, focusing solely on their social networks, positions or activities comes up short. It is not *when* or *that* these practices or identities *may* be cultural but rather that they *are* inherently cultural.

We enter this conversation by revisiting the concept of social remittances. First, we argue that people’s experiences prior to migration strongly influence what they do in the countries where they settle; this, in turn, affects what they remit back to their homelands, which becomes clear when we analyse migration through a transnational lens. The ideas and practices migrants bring with them actively shape who and what they encounter in the countries where they move, which then shapes what they send back. In the case of the Dominican towns of Boca Canasta and Villa Sombrero—the empirical cases on which we base our argument—migrants arrive with a keen interest in sport, a long history of active community organisation, a robust track record in participatory democracy and a strong sense of responsibility to the collective good. These values and practices affect how they interact with the broader community in the US, what they are exposed to and adopt there, and what they ultimately export to their communities in the Dominican Republic.

Second, just as scholars differentiate between individual and collective economic remittances (Goldring 2004), we also find it useful to distinguish between individual and collective social remittances, i.e. between social remittances exchanged and deployed by individuals and those that circulate and are harnessed in collective, organisational settings. While individuals communicate ideas and practices to each

other in their roles as friends, family members or neighbours, they also communicate in their capacity as members of a hometown association (HTA), political party or church. These collective social remittances not only strongly affect what organisations *do* but also *how* they do it. In particular, they affect ideas about organisational management, capacity-building, what development and progress mean and how communities know when they have achieved them.

Finally, we describe the potential for social remittance impact to *scale up* and *scale out*: not only do social remittances affect local-level organisational culture and practice, they can also influence regional and national changes. Social remittances which affect politics can also ‘scale out’ to influence other domains of practice such as religion and economics. Moreover, individual and collective social remittances also strongly influence the way organised groups relate to state structures and foment ‘state–society synergies’ (Evans 1996).

Revisiting Social Remittances

In a 1998 paper and subsequently in *The Transnational Villagers* (2001), Levitt coined the term *social remittances* to call attention to the fact that, in addition to money, migrants export ideas and behaviours back to their sending communities. She observed four types of social remittance—norms, practices, identities and social capital—that circulated between the Dominican Republic and Boston in the USA. Social remittance exchanges occur when migrants return to live in or visit their communities of origin, when non-migrants visit those in the receiving country, or through the exchange of letters, videos, cassettes, e-mails, blog posts and telephone calls. They are distinct from, but often reinforce and are reinforced by, other forms of global cultural circulation.

While the idea of social remittances has gained some traction in the literature, it is not without critics. They argue that the ‘social’ should also include the ‘cultural’ and that social remittances do not just move in one direction. They also caution against seeing social remittances as always positive. We agree. However, to study how social remittances travel and to evaluate their impact, researchers have to look in one place at one point in time. While this methodological imperative can unintentionally suggest that ideas and practices travel only one way, they do, in fact, circulate continuously. What migrants bring and continue to receive from their homelands affects their experiences in the countries where they settle. This, in turn, affects what they send back to non-migrants who either disregard or adopt these ideas and behaviours, transforming them in the process, and eventually re-remitting them back to migrants who adopt and transform them once again.

Understanding how social remittances travel requires a transnational optic (Khagram and Levitt 2007). This does not mean that everything or everyone actively crosses borders all the time. It simply means that the analysis needs to take into account the possibility that migration takes place within a transnational social field. Looking only at dynamics in the home or host country is necessarily incomplete,

although the extent to which migrants and non-migrants actually engage in cross-border activities is an empirical question.

Much research on migration artificially distinguishes between immigrant assimilation and social mobility in a host country and migrants' continuing engagement and mobility *vis-à-vis* their homelands (Bean and Stevens 2003; Kasinitz *et al.* 2008). It also focuses too much on the economic at the expense of the socio-cultural. When culture is taken into consideration, it is usually with respect to the socio-cultural impact of remittance flows. We learn little about what travels, how and why, or about what determines the impact of these journeys. In the remainder of this section, we selectively summarise key findings about how culture affects the migration–development nexus, paying particular attention to work on social remittances.

Social relations clearly affect economic transfers (Cohen 2004; Portes *et al.* 2002). Migrants often send remittances as a form of social insurance (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). They choose strategically which connections to emphasise and which to let slide, based on what they anticipate their future needs will be. Kurien (2008) observed striking differences in how remittances were used in the three Indian villages she studied. Migrants from the Muslim village distributed their money to a large circle of community members, Hindus spent large sums on life-cycle rituals and, in the Christian village, remittances supported family expenses, including saving money for dowries and education.

The lion's share of the research on migration and development focuses on how economic remittances affect social outcomes. That knowledge and skills are also transferred is implicit but not fully explored. Remittances generally increase investments in human capital in countries of origin, particularly in health and education, although measuring their impact is difficult and context specific (de Haas 2007; United Nations Development Programme 2009).

The outcomes of these social and economic transfers are mixed. In her study of the behavioural changes underlying the relationship between remittances and lower infant mortality, Frank (2005) found that Mexican women with international migrant partners had significantly lower rates of smoking and higher levels of exercise, and were more likely to gain enough weight during pregnancy than their counterparts with partners in Mexico. However, they were also less likely to exclusively breastfeed their babies. Frank concludes that, while migration influences maternal behaviour in Mexico, it is not always positive. Lindstrom and Muñoz-Franco (2005) found that rural Guatemalan women with relatives living in urban areas or abroad were more likely to know more about contraception than women without migrant relatives but that the relationship was stronger for those with urban rather than international ties. Visiting and return migrants were also efficient disseminators of information and influenced behaviour more strongly than traditional public education and media programmes.

Migration and remittances also influence norms of marriage and fertility. Using time-series data, Fargues (2006) found that birth rates and migrant remittances in Morocco, Turkey and Egypt were strongly correlated, but in different ways. In

Morocco and Turkey, birth rates went down with remittance increases because migrants went to Europe, where they came into contact with European values about smaller family size. In contrast, birth rates in Egypt rose because most migrants went to the Gulf, where family values were more conservative (Social Science Research Council 2009). Health effects are mediated by a range of factors. Donato's recent (2008) comparison of the health status of children in Mexican migrant, non-migrant and returnee households found that girls who stayed in the US experienced greater improvements in health than did boys, but the effect reversed if the children returned to Mexico.

How immigration affects educational outcomes also varies. Remittances generate more money for education (Durand *et al.* 1996; López-Cordova 2005) so that poor families can keep their children in school longer. At the same time, children in areas of high out-migration are more likely to migrate themselves (de Haas 2007; Massey and Zenteno 1999) and to leave before completing school (Durand *et al.* 2001). Because most Mexican migrants to the US are employed in low-skilled jobs, more schooling does not automatically translate into gains in the workforce. Kandel and Kao (2001) found, in their study of children in Zacatecas, Mexico, that those living in homes from which people have migrated are less likely to express a desire to go to college than children in non-migrant homes. Furthermore, while, in the long run, migration generates more income for education, in the short term it reduces resources. Nobles (2008) found that Mexican families with emigrant fathers spent less money on children's education in the years right after migration although, eventually, children in migrant communities performed equally well or better in school.

How migration affects gender and class stratification has also been a major focus of research. According to de Haas (2007), because migration is itself selective, remittances generally go to specific social groups within particular communities. They challenge inequality by changing tastes, values and social norms but, again, the outcomes are mixed. Migration may reinforce traditional gender norms (Donnan and Werbner 1991; Gardner 1995) or improve education and autonomy for non-migrant women (Banerjee and Jayachandran 2002; Osella and Osella 2000). Dannecker (2005) found that Bangladeshi labour migrants introduced sexist images and ideas but also strengthened women's networks. Both Murphy (2008) and Taborga (2008) argue that the benefits of migration-driven women's empowerment are contingent and often contradictory.

Studies of the political impacts of migration also produce a mixed profile. Itzigsohn and Villacrés concluded that Dominican and Salvadoran migrants will not deepen democracy or economic transformation. 'Either because their interests are focused on participating in the politics of the society of reception or because the resources that they command make immigrants part of local elites, they are not the force that would challenge the current system that perpetuates exclusion' (2008: 683). Context clearly matters, however. Commenting on the influence of non-resident Indians over Indian economic policy, Kapur writes, '[t]he structural position and social embeddedness of the Indian diaspora and returning migrants enhances the

diffusion of ideas, and it appears likely that even more than financial remittances, “social remittances” (or the flow of ideas) are playing an important role in reshaping India’s economic policies’ (2004: 367). According to Kapur (2008), migrants reshape politics through three channels of departure, return and involvement from afar—changing the balance of power among different social groups, championing or thwarting policy initiatives, and weakening or strengthening political institutions.

Migration also affects politics by influencing cultural orientations and social norms. Much work in this vein focuses on professional, high-skilled migrants. These are the ‘technopols’ studied by Dominguez (1997), who promoted the democratic transition in Latin America, and the ‘Chicago Boys’, who studied at the University of Chicago and spearheaded neoliberalism in Chile (Barber 1995). Migration affects political life by influencing cultural orientations and social norms. In his study of the political attitudes of migrants returning to the Philippines from six countries of settlement, Rother (2009) found that migration sometimes leads to a more critical stance toward homeland politics but also resulted in less support for democratic principles, depending on where the migrant had settled.

Again, the impact is not always positive. Several studies find that migration affects development because it gives rise to consumption-oriented strategies of upward mobility and new aspirations among youth (Charsley 2005; Levitt 2001). Young people, who can migrate, are less likely to invest in local institutions and more likely to choose occupations that will help them succeed once they move. As a result, there is less labour and brainpower with which to build institutions at home and the country’s human capital base can grow weaker (Kapur and McHale 2005). A recent study of how migration affects five major sending countries confirms the ambiguous nature of social remittance impact. In countries like India, Morocco and Turkey, migration introduced attitudes and skills conducive to change which favourably affected development. Nevertheless, the very success of migration hindered development because non-migrants became convinced that migration involved few risks and high benefits and were, therefore, more likely to leave (Castles and Miller 2009). When more-educated individuals migrate there is also less pressure for reform, because the very people who migrate are those the most equipped to speak out and exercise ‘voice’.

Migration can also strengthen religious identities (Ahmad 2005; Osella and Osella 2007; Rajagopal 1997) or increase violence. Pakistanis and Yemenis—who migrated to Afghanistan to fight and then returned—are said to bring back new ideas and skills which encourage violence, while gang members of Central American origin—who get deported from the United States—are also seen as importing a culture of violence and crime back to their countries of origin (Kapur 2008).

All in all, argues de Haas (2007), migration and remittances seem to be transformative rather than disruptive, but it is quite difficult to disentangle their effects from broader social change processes. The growing body of work on social remittance impact generally focuses on transfers of ideas and resources between individuals and their impact on families and households. How social remittances are

deployed collectively in organisational settings, and their impact on institution-building and governance, are not well understood. Moreover, much of the research on idea and skill transfers focuses on professional rather than labour migrants. It considers countries of origin and settlement as isolated developments rather than as two sites in an interconnected social field.

Methods and Context

This article is based on nearly 20 years of research in a Dominican community spanning Boston and the Dominican Republic that Levitt described in *The Transnational Villagers*. She continues to do fieldwork with community members in the US and her most recent visit to the Dominican Republic was in 2004. In January 2009, Lamba-Nieves began working in the same community of Boca Canasta¹ and the neighbouring village of Villa Sombrero. He is also studying Dominicans in New York as part of a larger project on migrant associations and state–society relations. Lamba-Nieves conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with residents of these two communities living in the US. Most of his respondents are past and present members of the *Movimiento para el Desarrollo de Boca Canasta* (Modebo) and the *Sociedad Progresista de Villa Sombrero* (Soprovis), the HTAs in these two communities. He also interviewed city government officials, consular representatives and other community leaders, and spent many hours at baseball games, committee meetings and fundraising events. In June 2009, he spent four weeks in Boca Canasta and Villa Sombrero, where he completed 20 semi-structured interviews with community members, elected officials, political leaders and HTA members and directors. As in the US, he attended meetings, community events and celebrations, where he could note the similarities, differences and continuous interactions between community members at home and abroad.

Most of the HTA members interviewed are directly involved in the management of the associations' chapters and sit on the Board of Directors. Membership in both groups is broadly defined, but also varies slightly by chapter. Generally, anyone who makes a contribution or attends an activity is considered an HTA member, but only a select group serves actively on the Board. These leaders, both male and female, are well known and respected in the community and maintain active transnational ties. They are also likely to be involved in more than one community organisation and to have political contacts. HTA leaders in the US are almost exclusively first-generation migrants with varying occupational profiles and migratory statuses.

Boca Canasta and Villa Sombrero are neighbouring, semi-urban communities located in the southern region of the Dominican Republic, in the Province of Peravia. According to the 2002 Dominican Census of Population and Housing, the total population of Boca Canasta was 3,020, while 6,251 resided in Villa Sombrero. Census figures also indicated that over 35 per cent of the households in Boca Canasta had at least one family member living abroad. The figure for Villa Sombrero is close to

12 per cent. These same proportions are evidenced when analysing the number of households that receive money from abroad on a regular basis.²

Social remittances are produced and consumed in a highly developed, fairly stable transnational social field. According to the 2002 Dominican Census, nearly 10 per cent of Dominican households have members living abroad. According to the Inter-American Development Bank, there were approximately 2 million Dominican adults residing outside the country in 2004 (IDB 2004). While most settle along the Eastern seaboard of the US, there are also significant numbers living in Spain, Switzerland, Italy and Germany. In 2007, Dominican government tallies showed that remittances totalled over 3 billion dollars—or 8.3 per cent of the country's GDP—and were the second-largest source of foreign income after tourism (Banco Central de la República Dominicana 2008)

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Dominican state largely ignored its emigrants despite their increasing contribution to the national economy. The state's response changed dramatically during the 1990s as a more democratic political environment flourished. Important constitutional amendments were passed during this period, including the extension of dual citizenship in 1994. Three years later, and after Leonel Fernández was elected, the right to vote was extended to Dominicans abroad (although, due to the high cost, it was not actually implemented until 2004). Fernández has been quite responsive to the emigrant community (having spent much of his childhood in New York), proactively enacting policies and programmes that support transnational social ties and the involvement of migrant populations in political affairs at home and abroad.

Recent efforts include the creation of Consultative Councils for Dominicans Abroad (CCDA) in cities around the world where there is a large presence of Dominicans. The Councils are designed to integrate emigrants into national policy discussions. The government also supported the creation of a National Council for Dominican Communities Abroad (known in Spanish as CONDEX) to serve as the official platform for dialogue between the Dominican state and the migrant communities. In October 2009, as part of a constitutional overhaul, the National Assembly approved the establishment of seven legislative seats for representatives from the overseas community, who will be elected every four years starting in 2012. Nevertheless, due to funding constraints, many of these efforts have stalled. The Dominican state has demonstrated its commitment to include migrants in the policy-making process but the impact of these policies, nationally and locally, remains to be seen.

What Migrants Bring

To further refine the concept of social remittances, we trace how the ideas and practices migrants bring with them are transformed as they are used in the United States and then remitted back to the Dominican Republic. We find that one of the principal reasons migrants start or re-activate community development organisations

in the US is because they bring a healthy dose of prior experience with community-based projects with them and because they have been raised to feel a strong sense of responsibility to their community. In other words, they come to the US with a culture of participation and conscientiousness that it is natural for them to recreate after they move. These experiences shape their encounters with other immigrant communities as well as their interactions with the native-born. They also influence how and when they come into contact with city and state government actors.

Both Soprovis and Modebo were founded in the Dominican Republic in the 1970s to address local needs during a period of significant economic and political instability, and quickly became important engines of development in both communities. They supported health and vocational training at a time when the country was recovering from the brutal Trujillo dictatorship but was still under the thumb of Joaquín Balaguer's only slightly less repressive regime. Because both communities lacked many services, these groups took on the task of meeting basic needs and of pressuring the Dominican state to take better care of its residents.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, international migration developed in full force and large numbers of residents moved to New York and Boston. Many of the people who migrated already had significant experience working in community organisations. In Boca Canasta, for example, *La Asociación de Agricultores Daniel Báez* (the farmers' organisation), the *Liga Campesina* (the baseball league), the *Asociación de Padres y Amigos del Colegio* (the parents and friends' association that supported the school), the Church Council and the youth clubs were long-standing features of the community landscape. They provided safe spaces for non-partisan political engagement and for claims-making. Interestingly, the same youth clubs organised by the Balaguer regime to keep young people out of radical politics eventually became politicised entities that denounced its repressive policies.

In Boca Canasta and Villa Sombrero, youth clubs and other civic associations built parks and recreation centres and organised cultural programmes. These activities strengthened social ties, instilled in participants a sense of commitment to the community, and taught them leadership and management skills. When participants migrated, they took these skills and experiences with them. They also took a tradition of labour-sharing, a strong sense of gratitude toward their birthplace and its residents, and the experience of living in communities with rich associational lives. On more than one occasion, hometown leaders attributed the immigrant community's high level of mobilisation to its agricultural roots. In the past, residents organised *convites*, or informal self-help networks to help with planting and harvesting. Participants donated their labour in exchange for food and the promise that they would get help when their crops were ready to harvest. Although *convites* are no longer common, the logic of self-help, volunteering and collaboration is still alive and well.

As a result, migrants already knew how to organise effective participatory community organisations, valued strong social ties and were successful fundraisers when they arrived. While, at first, support for community projects came from

individuals acting on their own, by the early 1980s, transplanted leaders took steps to organise their first community organisation chapters. Although they saw themselves as quasi-independent entities—with their own boards, by-laws and agendas—the administrative structures of these new groups mirrored those of groups working in the Dominican Republic with similar missions and goals.³ That US leaders maintained close ties to leaders back home also contributed to their success. Because the exchange rate in the early 1980s was so favourable, migrants raised a great deal of money, which funded important social services and infrastructural improvements.

Dominican migrants also bring a passion for partisan politics (Guarnizo *et al.* 2003; Itzigsohn and Villacrés 2008; Portes *et al.* 2007). One respondent told us that he had been born with the PRD (*Partido Revolucionario Dominicano*, one of the principal political parties) in his genes. Another stated that the next campaign begins the day after the last Presidential election. Politics is a way of life that is also transplanted and ensures migrants' continued involvement and contact with each other. Because Dominicans enjoy the right to vote from abroad, and make big financial contributions to political candidates, all major political parties have headquarters in cities with large numbers of immigrants. Candidates often visit emigrants to raise funds and garner support. Even candidates for mayor in Baní (the city closest to Boca Canasta and Villa Sombrero) have visited Boston and met with leaders of the HTAs.

Migrants brought cultural as well as associational practices with them. Baseball is, and always has been, a major part of community life. Many migrants grew up playing for their local team or supporting it in some way. This love of sport inspired them to start their own summer baseball and softball leagues in Boston, which are similar to the *Liga Campesina* on the island, and which involve Dominicans from all parts of the country. Men from Boca Canasta organised the *Liga Dominicana* in 1986 and the *Liga Jervin Cabral* in 1997.⁴ The *Liga Jervin Cabral* has four teams, composed primarily of migrants in their 30s and 40s. Its Board of Directors hosts fundraising events throughout the season to cover expenses. Migrants from Villa Sombrero also started chapters of the *Liga Soprovís* in Boston and New York and have used softball as a way to strengthen social ties abroad and keep their sporting traditions alive.

During the baseball and softball season, the community regularly remakes the physical space, not just to practise sports, but to recreate the *colmadones*, or big, open-air bodegas that Dominicans go to at the weekends to visit, drink beer and enjoy music with friends. In the case of Boston's Jervin Cabral League, for example, games take place on Saturdays at centrally located public fields. While team members play, their families socialise with one another. People bring food and beer that adults consume out of public view. Games provide a welcome escape from the daily routine, a chance to connect with friends and an opportunity to get out of the house after the long New England winter. Many community projects are also planned from the sidelines. The park is a re-staging ground for needed communal interactions that are so common in the community of origin.

Baseball fields are also sites where members in the US and on the island hold a *kermesse*, a day-long community festival organised to raise money for collective projects. Planned weeks in advance, the *kermesse* is like a big street party where people buy home-cooked food, listen to Dominican and Caribbean music, play baseball, dominoes or bingo and meet old friends. While *kermesses* held in the Dominican Republic and the US involve a similar set of activities, there are important differences in how they are organised. Carlos Melo, a former president of Soprovisto-Boston, explained that a *kermesse* in Villa Sombrero usually took place on property collectively owned by the community. They did not need permits to sell alcoholic beverages or to play loud music. Because a *kermesse* organised in Boston takes place on public property, and they have to worry about disturbing their neighbours, organisers have learned to negotiate the bureaucracy required to organise a large public event.

In sum, many people spend hours each week helping to keep these community organisations and baseball leagues alive. Since members belong not only to Modebo or Soprovisto but to church groups, sports leagues and parent–teacher groups, they see one another regularly. These encounters are not just occasions for exchanging news but also for exchanging information and know-how.

Participating in baseball and softball leagues also brings migrants into contact with other immigrants from the Caribbean and neighbouring communities in the Dominican Republic. They negotiate with one another over the use of playing fields, invite one another to their respective celebrations or come together to discuss matters related to their home country. Because they come into contact with city officials when they organise public fundraising events, migrants learn how to negotiate their way through the city bureaucracy and to access its resources.

Dealing with permits, red tape and protocol, several leaders told us, is part of learning the way the system works in the US, how things are kept in order—a sharp contrast to the disorder and indifference that characterises most dealings with the Dominican government. Over time, abiding by legal norms, demanding accountability, and upholding contractual agreements has become part of their organisational routine and is also part of what migrants remit back to the Dominican Republic.

Modebo leaders in Boston, for example, upon learning that the community had agreed to pay for the day-to-day operating costs of a new government-funded computer centre in Boca Canasta, demanded to see a copy of the official contract. According to Danny Peña, a long-time leader and current treasurer, Modebo members reacted skeptically, arguing that if the state builds a school, it pays for the cost of the Internet and other utilities, so why wouldn't it pay for the operating costs of the computer centre as well? They feared that the government was short-changing the community. Other members expressed surprise that the community would accept a deal that required Boston members to raise an additional \$300 to \$400 each month. Although they eventually arrived at an acceptable solution, the Boston group decided that all subsequent statutes and contracts would need prior approval. They wanted to guarantee a level of internal accountability and transparency that would minimise

future risks and shield them from suspect government practices that might jeopardise their financial position.

Migrant leaders also export back lessons about managing public and community spaces. As Carlos Melo explained, during a recent visit home he learned that Haitian residents were using the community's softball field to play soccer without permission from the local authorities. Seeing this as potentially problematic, he suggested to the Mayor that a committee be organised to draw up a schedule and rules for using the fields. As a past president of the *Liga Jervin Cabral* in Boston, Carlos had experience securing permits for the seasonal use of public baseball fields. He recognised the benefits of having an official system in place and argued that Villa Sombrero should adopt similar arrangements. Because he and others had come into regular contact with what they perceive as a well-regulated system of rules and norms, their expectations of public officials and offices have changed. As Elvin Soto, vice-president of Soprovís-Boston, explained, 'One establishes more order, one demands that [level of] order, because one lives in that order'.

Social remittances do not just travel through interpersonal contacts. Technology easily enables non-migrants to keep abreast of what the community is doing. Residents from Boca Canasta and Villa Sombrero can tune into a local television channel (or through the Internet) to watch *Uniendo Fronteras* (Uniting Borders) and *Aquí y Allá*, (Here and There)—two weekly television programmes produced by migrants in Boston to showcase their activities to people back home. Producers also travel to the Dominican Republic to capture the sights and sounds of the hometown community, which they broadcast every Sunday on the local Spanish-language cable station or via the Internet. These two programmes allow migrants and non-migrants to simultaneously keep informed of social and cultural activities wherever they take place. It also allows them to actively witness the transformation of their community back home and the growth of the immigrant community in Boston.

Both Soprovís and Modebo use these media platforms to spread the word about their achievements. There are often television cameras at a *kermesse* or dance party in Boston or at a Patron Saint Day celebration or the inauguration of a new facility in the Dominican Republic. Community members celebrate their successes and encourage migrants and non-migrants to continue to support them. They also transmit new ideas and skills, denounce politicians and make claims of local authorities, who are also often watching. Recently, both migrants and non-migrants have been using the Internet to broadcast news and other information to larger publics. Two websites—*villasombrero.com* and *bocacanasta.com*—have become forums where people post photographs and videos and write messages, including their opinions about political and social developments in the US and back home.

Migrants from Boca Canasta and Villa Sombrero, therefore, bring strong traditions of political and civic activism and a deep sense of continued responsibility to their communities when they move to the US. They adopt these so that they work within the social and spatial constraints of the US. In the process, they come into contact with

other ethnic and native-born neighbours and with the municipal government. These experiences, along with what they observe and incorporate from their everyday lives, strongly influence the skills and knowledge they send back to the island as individuals and as a group. Non-migrants learn easily of these developments, through their interactions with individuals and through mediated channels that bring new ideas and practices into their living rooms, recreational spaces and community centres.

Collective Social Remittances

While most studies of social remittances focus on the ideas and practices that individual migrants export to their relatives and friends, our fieldwork reveals how these socio-cultural exchanges affect organisational life and community development more broadly. Goldring (2004) disaggregated three types of economic remittances, including family, collective or community-based, and investment remittances. The term 'collective remittances' (*remesas colectivas*) describes monies raised by a group that are used to benefit that group and are, therefore, distinct from family or worker remittances. Here, we build on this notion and suggest the idea of collective social remittances, that are exchanged by individuals in their role as organisational members and are used in organisational settings such as hometown associations, church groups or political parties. Modebo's demands for clear and fair contracts and for clearer regulation of facility use are two examples of collective social remittances which we expand upon in this section.

Most of the people we interviewed in the Dominican Republic and the United States agree that the opportunity to travel and live abroad transforms migrants' general attitude and 'vision' in several ways. One theme raised repeatedly was what people referred to as 'outlook'. They felt that the spaces within which people imagined themselves and their aspirations for those spaces had radically changed. What they wanted for themselves as a community, and how it was achieved, shifted dramatically.

According to Samuel Sánchez, a 42-year-old man who migrated from Boca Canasta to Boston in 1989, 'people who have been here [in the US] do not have the same mentality. One learns many things here... we see the world differently, there is a different culture'. When asked to be more specific, Samuel said that, unlike his father, he regularly attends parent-teacher meetings at his child's school. Since migrating, he has also learned to wait his turn at public offices and to obey stricter supervisors and rules at work. While it took him time to adapt, he now considers many of these differences positive. The fact that people are accountable for their actions in the US is something he likes and would like to see more of in the Dominican Republic.

This different 'vision' our respondents alluded to also shapes collective life and is reflected in the projects proposed by migrant HTA members. A sports complex—which includes a softball and Little League field, clubhouse, pool and basketball court—that Soprovís is building is one example. Carlos Melo explained what drew them to the project:

We saw that we had not done much to promote sports activities, and that there weren't places in the community where we could spend leisure time with our families... when we travelled there (back to Sombrero), we had to go to other communities [to enjoy family-oriented places]... we had to do something related to sports because they say that sports can discourage the youth from vices... there's going to be a youth baseball field to teach the children [how to play]. Big league players can come out of there.

In other words, community members had seen and grown accustomed to these kinds of facility in Boston. They saw them as keeping families together and kids off the streets, and as potential breeding grounds for new baseball talent. They also wanted to be able to use these facilities during their vacations back home.

This project reflects members' changing notions of the meaning of development and their aspirations for their community. The sports complex is the biggest project the HTA has undertaken. Its total cost is estimated at 7 to 8 million pesos (approximately \$200,000). According to 49-year-old Luis Báez, the current president of Soprovis in Villa Sombrero who has never been to Boston, 'Because they are in a developed country, they are looking at other types of constructions and edifices, other sports complexes, and they want to bring those ideas to their community... Boston has always thought big'. He reported that Boston leaders also plan to build an asphalted road linking the community to the sports facility (which is far from the town's centre) and to an avenue leading to the nearby beach. It is part of their plan to increase tourism in the area.

They have a futuristic idea, with a vision that I said: 'That's not for now', but we have to start thinking about those things. Now we see it as difficult, but we have to start somewhere, then it gets easier... Because they're in big countries, they're teaching us to think big. Many times we do not share that view, because one thinks as one is. We think smaller.

Soprovis' New York chapter also sent a fully equipped ambulance to transport critical care patients to the nearby hospital in Baní. Because they have been unsuccessful at getting municipal funding, committee members charge patients who can afford to pay, which subsidises the service for others. They also buy medicines and equipment for the local health clinic and organise health fairs where check-ups, medicines and educational materials are provided. They take on topics that were previously taboo—such as teenage pregnancy, reproductive health and AIDS awareness. While these subjects may be off-limits on the island, current president William Pimentel explained, they need to be taken on directly and openly. Committee members also distributed condoms and informational literature during the recent patron saint festivities; they even gave bar- and bodega-owners condoms to distribute free of charge to their patrons.

The acquisition of skills and know-how also translates into business ventures. When founder and former President of Soprovis-New York, Bolivar Dumé, was getting ready to retire and spend extended periods in Villa Sombrero, he joined a

group of local investors and purchased land in the town's centre to build a gated community. He wants to build a housing project according to strict rules and building codes so it does not become a 'slum'. The sales contract, which applies equally to all buyers, clearly states that there will be no mixed-use commercial properties, that houses can be no more than two stories high, and that they can only be constructed from certain materials. He knows that contracts in the US include riders that specify certain conditions. He hopes that future projects, in and outside the community, will also be built to code. Sombrero's rapid growth needs to be orderly and purposeful so that important projects—like building roads—are not afterthoughts. Sombrero must live up to its reputation as a modern town and 'think about tomorrow'.

Finally, collective social remittances also transformed community institutions like the town's youth baseball leagues. Rafael Tejada, a former member of Modebo who worked actively to construct Boca Canasta's baseball field, remembers the patched baseballs, shoddy equipment and disorganisation of the league during his youth. Coaching a Little League team in Boston was different. He received a roster of team members, a bag full of playing and safety equipment, and uniforms for the players. These experiences inspired him to raise funds to get better equipment for the leagues in Boca Canasta. When the leagues on the island subsequently reorganised, his brother, who had also been involved in Boston but had since returned home, helped to fundraise by sending letters to prospective donors, another practice picked up in Boston.

When my brother went back everything changed. The league used to play in Bani against teams from the nearby towns. But when he arrived, he began to take the kids to play in the capital and to other towns. He began to send the letters, they received donations from [local] people and they would purchase the necessary equipment.

His brother, he says, basically replicated the strategies he had seen in Boston with a significant positive impact because almost all the young men in the community who are 25 years or younger participate.

Having 'big ideas', however, can cut both ways. Sometimes social remittances get translated into costly infrastructure projects that, as Don Luis hints, non-migrants do not agree with. Non-migrants want to meet basic needs first, like schools, housing and health care, and then support culture and recreation. They want to renovate the community centre so they can hold computer classes and have an office for the Civil Defence and the community-run water company. While Bolívar Dumé may build stronger, safer buildings, his gated community will undoubtedly increase the social distance between families who have (and can afford to purchase one of his homes) and those who have not.

Nor are migrants uncritical, starry-eyed novices. They readily acknowledge that there is widespread racism and discrimination in the US and that not everything works as it should. In fact, the US is far from perfect—witness Hurricane Katrina and

the Virginia Tech shootings. In most cases, though, they concluded that everything is relative. The level of corruption and ineptitude in the US still seems better than that in Santo Domingo.

Scaling Up and Scaling Out

Migrants took a strong commitment to work for the collective good through active social, political and religious organisations with them to the US. They also took technical and organising skills that aided their efforts in New York and Massachusetts. Their experiences abroad challenged and expanded how they did things and why they did them. The types of project they took on and how they implemented them reflected these changes. As groups in the US matured, assumed the lion's share of responsibility for fundraising, and learned how to work transnationally, they took the lead in proposing ventures that were consonant with their new 'vision' of what hometown development entails.

Projects like the sports complex, the fire station and the ambulance are examples of the chapters' growing organisational capacity. They reflect migrants' heightened concern with safety and health and their assumption that living in a developed community means living somewhere where these services are part and parcel of what good governments do. They foment 'state–society synergies' or collaboration between social actors and government entities that bridge public–private divides (Evans 1996). These ideas can *scale out*, as residents apply them to other domains of practice: they expect the government not only to share the cost of public safety but also to partner with them in providing education and health. They can also *scale up*, as community members not only change their expectations of local government but of provincial and national governments as well.

For example, Soproviz' Boston members pursued projects inspired by the public services they used in Boston. They sent a fire truck and supported the creation of a community fire squad to respond quickly to emergencies. After the fire truck was delivered to Villa Sombrero, residents formed a committee to train volunteer firefighters and find a place to build a fire station. Because migrants were unwilling to fund these efforts indefinitely, they pressured the government to assume some of the burden of support. At the time of (this) writing, the Mayor has stepped up to the plate, announcing his willingness to pay for some part of the services. Thus, a project conceived by migrants as a way to modernise the town's public safety infrastructure has become a sustainable joint citizen–state effort which has rewritten the rules of state and citizen responsibility. Most residents are very satisfied with the fire squad and expect that other partnerships can be developed to provide basic services that are still lacking.

Another example involves social remittances scaling out to other associations in ways that promote organisational learning. This was the case when the Modebo-Boston chapter decided to create an ambulance service, several months after Villa Sombrero received their ambulance. Once they had bought a used vehicle from a

nearby state, leaders began figuring out how to ship it to the Dominican Republic. They needed lots of money for fees and taxes, since the vehicle was registered under an individual's name and was, therefore, not tax-exempt (Soprovis' vehicle was registered as a municipal government vehicle so they did not face this problem). Modebo's leaders feared that if they entered into a similar agreement with a politician or a government leader, they would risk losing control of the vehicle.

Once the vehicle arrived, leaders needed to work out how it would be taken care of. Who would drive the passengers? Where would it be stationed? Who would pay for the maintenance and insurance? Leaders in Boston had not anticipated these issues and were frustrated by what they perceived as island-based leaders' unwillingness to commit. Finally, Carlos Melo, who headed the Soprovis' Boston chapter when the ambulance was purchased, was called in. He explained the legal and administrative requirements and helped Modebo members to see how they needed to adjust Soprovis' strategy to the Boca Canasta reality. They formed a trust or special committee to draft a series of regulations to govern vehicle use that they modelled after their neighbours' but also customised to meet their particular needs.

Another interesting example of scaling out involves Soprovis' attempt to increase accountability and transparency in the management of the town's patron saint festivities. Usually organised and administered by a special committee, patron saint festivities are an important community activity that generates substantial economic activity and revenue for the community. According to Soprovis' leaders, in recent years—and before 2008—the festivities were run by a group of residents who were suspected of cheating because so little money was generated. In 2008, Soprovis took over and established a series of administrative practices that stressed transparency and increased accountability. They established stricter reporting guidelines and other measures—like requiring each kiosk to submit sales figures. The net revenues that year were well over 200,000 pesos (over \$5,000). They also produced a detailed financial report for community members. The following year, a financial report was posted on the Internet. According to Carlos Melo, these measures were instituted in Villa Sombrero because they grew accustomed to reporting financial matters to members in the US who wanted to know how their money was being used.

Demands for greater transparency and accountability also scale out into the private sector. According to Ismael Díaz Melo, people who have lived abroad or who work closely with migrants make firmer commitments regarding time and money. They demand project contracts and schedules and expect them to be honoured. But, he says, these practices carry both benefits and risks. They formalise business transactions but suggest to participants that, if no signed paper exists, then no one is responsible. Likewise, when migrants wanted to invest in Bolívar Dumé's gated community project and asked a local lawyer to serve as their proxy, hometown investors interpreted their request as a lack of trust. Their reticence led those from Boston to pull out of the project.

Social remittances also scale up to other levels of organisation and governance. When Levitt did her fieldwork in the 1990s, for example, many of the people she

talked to did not consider the state responsible for providing basic services. They said that there was too much poverty for the government to also build roads. Now, residents see these activities and institutional frameworks as part and parcel of what constitutes good governance. The more people adopt this stance, and the more people demand contracts and their compliance, the more these social remittances will scale up to other levels of governance. Similarly, the more people demand accountability and transparency in community projects, the more likely they are to demand it of political parties and business as well.

A funeral home renovation project is another example of scaling up. When Soprovís rebuilt its funeral home, it did so in partnership with *Procomunidad*, a national government programme that supports community projects. The government financed 75 per cent of the project and Soprovís raised the rest from migrant contributions. Because the organisation had a financial stake in the project, they requested that Ismael Díaz Melo, a native and well-known architect and developer, be placed in charge. When the project stalled because funds were held up by *Procomunidad*, the community used its contacts in the national government to restart it. The funeral home was rebuilt in record time and within budget. As Modebo and Soprovís gain experience developing projects and become more skilled at dealing with politicians and government agencies, these types of venture are becoming increasingly common. The expectation of public–private partnerships brokered locally is replicated nationally. Residents, who are empowered to actively engage in the public domain, demand greater accountability from national as well as local government agencies.

Scaling up also occurs when organisations are able to make their demands heard at the national level and eventually wrest control of important community services. For years, Soprovís lobbied the central government and INAPA (the National Water Supply and Sewage Institute) to solve the growing water problem in Villa Sombrero. After countless efforts, the agency responded favourably, even going a step farther and delegating to the community the power to run the water system. This move was part of a government initiative, in conjunction with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), to expand potable water provision in the Dominican Republic and develop pilot initiatives where communities participated actively in the management of the water infrastructure. Soprovís' willingness to fully finance the system from the outset (with the help of stateside chapters), their ability to convince residents that paying the water fees would ensure better services, and their political savvy and previous successes in partnering with state entities, were major factors behind the government's decision to build the system and cede control. Since 1997 an elected community board runs the service. Their success serves as a model that the state has tried to replicate in other parts of the country.

Conclusion

Findings from our ongoing fieldwork refine the idea of social remittances in several ways. First, we stress how migrants' prior experiences and the ideas and practices they

bring with them influence the types of remittance they send back. Social remittances are clearly cultural and social and they circulate, continuously and iteratively, rather than travel one-way. Second, we explore the collective nature of social remittances, including how they are exchanged within organisational contexts and how they transform organisational practice. Finally, we show how social remittances scale up to regional and national organisations and scale out to other domains of practice.

We stress the positive and negative effects of social remittances on home communities. Many people fear that the flow of ideas from America devalues family and defies consumerism. In small villages throughout the Dominican Republic, a generation is being raised on remittances. These young people dream of making a home in the US rather than in their communities of origin. Instead of going to school or trying to find a job, they spend their days waiting for their monthly cheque or for the magic day when their visa finally arrives. It is not worth it to them to work in a factory or on a farm (if such work is available) because their parents send money anyway. Not only do their skills and discipline waste away while they wait to leave, but the economic base of their community continues to deteriorate. Constructing gated communities, while seen as an attempt to achieve more orderly, planned development, exacerbates the class stratification that has already worsened because of migration. Migrants and non-migrants also worry about deportees who committed crimes in the US and get into similar trouble when they return. Residents blamed them for introducing 'bad habits' and increasing crime and insecurity. They felt they set a bad example for local youth and compromised immigrants' reputation abroad. They also held them responsible for introducing new criminal technologies and contacts with international crime syndicates.

Thinking big is also not enough to make dreams a reality. Ideas have to be realised and sustained—the biggest challenge facing HTAs. Development is not just about delivering an ambulance or building a park. These projects require upkeep and maintenance. They require moving from isolated, discrete projects to ongoing, integrated long-term development plans.

There is a clear divide between scholars who are concerned with what happens to immigrants once they arrive in a new place and those concerned with what happens in the places where they come from. This is a false dichotomy. These processes were never disconnected and they are certainly not today. Continuing to speak about them and organise research around them separately is counterproductive. It reifies an artificial separation that does not reflect migrants' lives nor allow us to respond creatively to the challenges they face.

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 policy-makers, researchers need to uncover what determines how ideas and values travel and under what circumstances 'idea change' contributes to 'behavioural change'. Finally, two questions remain to be answered. When does local-level change in something like gender relations, for example, scale up to produce broader shifts in reproductive behaviour and labour market participation? Under

what circumstances can local-level democratic capacity-building scale up to produce stronger provincial and national governance?

Notes

- [1] Levitt used the pseudonym 'Miraflores' but community members have now given us permission to use the real name.
- [2] Many of the people we interviewed in the US and the Dominican Republic felt that these numbers were very low. Because population size is used to determine budgetary appropriations, residents believe that the national government deflates these figures to their advantage. Regarding the migration figures, past and current residents of Boca Canasta claim that almost every home in their community has someone living abroad. Residents of Villa Sombrero also claim that the number of people who have migrated abroad from their community is higher than that officially indicated.
- [3] In the early stages, US chapters defined their role as financial backers and supporters of projects developed by leaders back home. They saw themselves as supporting whatever projects the local committee selected, since its members understood the community's needs better and continued to struggle with its daily challenges. But, as the US-based groups grew more experienced at fundraising and organising, they began to propose their own projects and programmes. Most of the time, leaders on the island went along with their suggestions, in part, because they feared that disagreements would lead to a decline in financial support. At times, however, tensions arose over goals and strategies. Today, US chapters still support activities and efforts outlined by the home community but also craft their own projects, although these are often developed in conjunction with members back home. In the case of Soprovís, the director of one chapter will often seek support from other chapter leaders before proceeding forward.
- [4] One of the founders of both softball leagues explained that they chose to play softball because it requires less practice and physical condition and has a slower rhythm than baseball. Because migrants have to spend so much time at work, players do not have time to meet regularly to practise and train. They also saw softball as a more relaxed game in which older players could also take part.

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