



The
migration-development
nexus

Amaia Pérez Orozco

Gender, Migration and Development Series

The United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW) promotes applied research on gender issues, facilitates knowledge management, and supports capacity-building through networking mechanisms and multi-stakeholder partnerships with UN agencies, governments, academia and civil society.

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Working Paper 3
"The migration-development nexus"

Author: Amaia Pérez Orozco

United Nations International Research and Training
Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW)
César Nicolás Penson 102-A
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
Phone: 1-809-685-2111
Fax: 1-809-685-2117
Email: info@un-instraw.org
Webpage: <http://www.un-instraw.org>

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3

1. “Remittances-to-development”

Mainstream discourse on the impact of migration on the development of sending countries and communities has evolved from a rather negative perspective to a much more positive one. Whereas brain drain was the cornerstone of previous pessimistic visions, nowadays the opportunities for brain circulation opened up by migration are emphasized. Social remittances (embracing entrepreneurial, technological and cultural remittances), whether embodied in return migrants or channeled through any other means from the Diaspora, are praised. However, remittance flows are the key element accounting for such positive expectations. This discourse, which has been labeled as the “remittance-to-development” paradigm, is built around the following main assumptions:

1) The leading subject of this potentially win-win process is the individual migrant acting within the marketplace. Thus, market forces and individual migrants’ and their families’ entrepreneurship play the leading role in creating positive synergies between migration and development. Involving migrant organizations and Home Town Associations is seen as a sustainable, collective means of intervention that complements the individual initiatives of migrants and their families.

2) The key element in this process is the increase in financial resources derived from remittances. Although in-kind remittances are thought to be important, in-cash remittances are the cornerstone of this paradigm. Increased financial resources impact positively on development both in direct and indirect ways.¹ Market-led changes in the formal financial system are thought to derive into a kind of “inclusive financial democracy” that opens up new opportunities to remittance-senders and recipients, allowing them to undertake entrepreneurial activities.

3) Three mechanisms are emphasized. Firstly, strengthening the competition between remittance companies, in order to reduce costs and provide a broader range of financial services. Secondly, “banking the unbanked” -i.e. expanding the scope of the financial system to a wider population (remittance-recipients and senders, as well as the rest of the population, thanks to greater liquidity of financial institutions and their broadened presence). Thirdly, promoting remittance handlers’ (i.e. both senders and recipients) entrepreneurship that guarantees the creation of sustainable livelihoods, thus avoiding dependence on remittances.

2. Issues of concern

The narrowing of the understanding of the migration-development nexus to the above-mentioned elements is a cause for concern. It does not draw on a holistic, transnational and gender approach to that nexus, and the concept of development on which it is based builds on a double reductionism: development is reduced to economic development, and the latter is understood as market growth.

Development as “economic development”:

The globally agreed paradigm of development is that of human development. Nevertheless, when moving from theoretical discussions to implemented programmes and policies, this concept is narrowed down from a holistic notion of capabilities and freedoms to a wellbeing notion focusing on education, health and, mainly, income disposal. On the one hand, it means that there are key aspects not being taken into account, such as: (a) the (dis)empowering effect of migration on migrant populations and sending communities beyond what could be called entrepreneurial empowerment; and (b) the impact of migration on gender equality, both in individual (women within the household and the community) and collective terms (women as a heterogeneous collective and gender as

¹ This double positive impact is more thoroughly considered in Working Paper #4 “Remittances”.

a hierarchical axis structuring the socioeconomic system). On the other hand, education and health are viewed as means to development -i.e. market growth (as long as they constitute investment in human capital)- rather than as goals of development per se.

Economic development as market expansion:

The economic system provides resources needed to achieve human development. Thus economic development is a key dimension of the broader process of human development. The problem is that a single way of providing and accessing resources is taken into account when evaluating the impacts of migration: whether an increase in individual access to market-provided goods and services takes place. This implies, firstly, that no other ways of organizing the provision of resources needed to create capabilities are considered, thus implicitly establishing the market as the only way of organizing the economy. Thus the potential role that institutions could play in creating positive synergies between migration and development is disregarded or underestimated. Secondly, it means that only individual situations are studied, disregarding the impacts on the social process of securing access to needed resources -i.e. the recognition and exercise of basic human rights. For instance, when the positive impact of remittances on the access to education of remittance-recipient households is praised, no analysis of changes in the social right to education by the community of origin as a whole is made. This may lead to a third consequence, namely easing the process of privatization of social protection and other social rights. Indeed, remittances currently function as a substitute of social protection systems (e.g. migrants send remittances to unemployed brothers or aged parents because they have no unemployment or retirement benefits). This could be worsened by the privatized (life, retirement, health...) insurance systems being promoted as added financial services linked to remittances. Fourthly, the impact of migration on unpaid work (total work load, its intra-household and community distri-

bution, its role sustaining economic processes, etc.) is obscured.² For instance, promoting the creation of micro-enterprises by women has been blamed for increasing women's global -i.e. paid and unpaid- workload to unbearable levels. Moreover, privatization of social security systems has long been blamed for relying on women to absorb the ensuing invisible costs through their unpaid work.

A transnational perspective is lacking:

On the one hand, this means that the migration-development nexus is seen only in terms of the impacts of migration on sending countries. The dynamic interrelationships between the development processes of sending and receiving countries are not simultaneously studied. As a consequence, the migration policies of receiving countries and those aimed at strengthening the developmental potential of remittances in sending countries are determined according to entirely different criteria -i.e., security and labor market concerns define the former, whereas (supposedly) developmental aspects inform the latter. This reflects the notion that the current socioeconomic organization of receiving countries is in fact the model for development. Thus when talking about migration and development only the impacts on sending countries need be considered, not the global impact and sustainability of the current "development" models in receiving countries (which are in fact causally implicated in migration flows).

On the other hand, the situation of migrants all along the migration process -including their living and working conditions in host communities, as well as regard for their human rights during the journey- is not a matter of concern from a developmental point of view. Nevertheless, the situations faced by migrants embody transnational development processes that go beyond the impact of their movement to a given territory. Disregarding migrants' rights seriously risks instrumentalizing them -i.e., acknowledging their agency only as "global development pawns" and

²This aspect links with the discussion on global care chains that is addressed in Working Paper # 2 "Global Care Chains".

not as development beneficiaries. They migrate to sustain transnational families; the socio-economic systems of richer countries heavily rely on their labor and contributions; and, additionally, they are charged with the responsibility of developing their communities of origin. The risk of instrumentalization is even higher with regards to women, as their altruism for the sake of their transnational families -even to the detriment of their own wellbeing- is increasingly praised.³

Local development? The current focus on local development implies a further spatial reduction of the discussion. This focus represents a compartmentalized approach to the migration-development link –a link not considered relevant to other global phenomena, including national and international macroeconomic processes and policies. Thus the broader context is taken as a given within which local improvements must be sought. The broader framework that conditions local opportunities and constraints is not understood as an evolving scenario that could and should be changed, but as a fixed precondition. This limited view would not be as worrying if it were simply a matter of designing and implementing localized projects. The problem is that it is becoming the centerpiece of the global discourse on migration and development. Thus the ability to understand the interrelationships between global, national and local processes is lost, and the macro-level policies that condition structural opportunities and constraints do not draw on the developmental needs of sending communities.

3. Points to reorient the discussion

After reviewing the mainstream discourse and some of its potential risks, the following exploratory points aim to shift the discussion towards a more human-centered focus and the consideration of innovative questions.

The need to adopt a gender perspective: Addressing the migration-development nexus with a gender-sensitive approach involves considering a broad range of issues, including: (a) Gender acts as a systemic axis that structures the socioeconomic system as a whole, conditioning dynamics at the micro level (e.g., individual lives, households and entrepreneurial projects); at the meso level (e.g., labor markets and the performance of welfare states); and at the macro level (e.g., a new and sexualized international division of labor). (b) Consequently, a macro-meso-micro analysis is needed to evaluate the interrelationships between migration and development. This would allow for a better understanding of the interconnections between global, national and local processes, as well as between intra-household decision-making, institutional arrangements and macroeconomic conditions. (c) A gender perspective must take into account that women are not a homogeneous group. Gender must be understood as a subordinating variable qualified by other power relationships: class, ethnicity, nationality, migratory/citizenship status, sexual orientation, etc. Similarly, gender must not be seen as a binary and stable structure, but as a social performance -i.e., the (re)creation of gendered identities all along the migratory process is a key topic of analysis, and special attention should be paid to the avoidance of heteronormative assumptions.

The link between migration and the exercise of human rights: The ‘thick’ notion of human development as increasing people’s capabilities and freedoms should not be seen only in individual terms. The social process of securing these capabilities and freedoms -i.e., of capabilities becoming rights- is at the center of the development process. So development should be understood as the comprehensive right to fully enjoy human rights. The denial of such rights often underlies the decision to migrate -for instance, when access to basics such as education or the right to freely enjoy sexuality are refused. At

³ This argument is further explored in Working Paper #4 “Remittances”.

the same time, migration affects the definition of rights, of who can enjoy them and how.

A few points should be stressed in this regard. Firstly, the set of rights that comprises the hardcore of the development process should be democratically determined. The interests and needs of diverse social groups should be taken into account, especially those of women. In this way, the migration-development debate can be linked to debates on governance and political participation, specifically women's political participation. Secondly, operational proposals are needed while this process takes place. Consider for instance the most common items of expenses for remittances, all of which involve basic rights -to adequate nutrition, housing, education, health and social protection (unemployment, illness, disability, retirement).⁴ Thirdly, reflecting on rights means reflecting on institutions, which places the public sector in a preeminent analytical and political position. Fourthly, as long as access to rights is segmented, questions such as discrimination, inequality and privilege must remain a central focus. This should be the case regarding the discrimination suffered by most migrants due to their migratory status, as well as the unequal benefits accruing from remittance flows according to social class, ethnicity and gender. A reflection on citizenship from a transnational perspective is thus urgently needed, one that fully recognizes the spatial dimensions of the issue. What spatial limits should define citizenship and/or rights and their enjoyment? A cornerstone of this debate should be the migrants' entitlement to rights all along the migratory process (prior, during the journey and stay, and after -if return occurs).

Evaluating the impact of migration on economic development in both sending and receiving countries and communities: The economy is the transversal process of sustaining life -i.e., of satisfying human needs (without hinde-

ring non-human life!) and providing the resources needed to acquire capabilities and freedoms. On the one hand, this means that market processes are not relevant per se, but rather insofar as they contribute to (or hamper) human wellbeing. Since a mere increase in financial resources does not automatically lead to an increase in wellbeing, the assumed direct positive impact of remittances must be put into question. On the other hand, this means that the relevance of different economic spheres (markets, public provision of goods and services, community work, household production, etc.) for the satisfaction of human needs should be fully considered, and that the performance of each economic sphere must not be studied in isolation, but in relation to each other. Thus the impact of remittances on the performance of this integrated economic circuit should be the focus of analysis, not just their impact on market exchanges.

A few additional aspects should be pinpointed. (1) Special attention should be paid to unpaid work and non-material needs, because the absence of a monetary measure usually leads to their being ignored. Income expansion through unpaid work is not just a quantitative process but a qualitative one in which social and emotional aspects are also involved. (2) Social power relationships affect the way individuals and groups are located within the economy, that is, the distribution of (paid and unpaid) work and access to resources. Gender is a key organizational axis of the economic system, while at the same time economic activities may alter the meaning of gender. (3) While all relevant economic spheres should be acknowledged, it is worth noting that not all are driven by the same forces. Capitalist market activities aim at capital accumulation. That is, people's wellbeing is a means to profit making, but not necessarily its goal. Tensions stemming from these conflicting logics (between the process of capital accumulation and the process of ensuring people's standards

⁴ Another set of rights should be added to this proposed set, namely, the right to adequate care and to freely chose carework. Those rights are constitutive of development models and, as long as they highlight deeply gendered processes, any gender analysis on the linkages between migration and development should address them. This point is further developed in Working Paper # 2 "Global Care Chains".

of living) should be recognized and identified in specific locations. (4) The role of public institutions and households (or community organizations) in dealing with such tensions should be acknowledged. This means identifying the economic spheres responsible for guaranteeing the satisfaction of people's needs and thus absorbing structural tensions. Women have historically taken on a disproportionate share of this responsibility, their unpaid work playing a critical role in mitigating those tensions.

According to that broaden and gender-sensitive notion of the economy, economic development should be understood as an improvement in the processes of providing resources that are needed for human development. The following criteria should be considered when evaluating the impact of migration on local economic development, both in sending and receiving countries:

- Whether an improvement in the collective (beyond intra-household) ability to satisfy human needs is observed –i.e., a more efficient, sustainable and equitable process of human needs satisfaction resulting from the interaction of diverse economic spheres.
- Whether increases in economic activity are driven by the logic of creating wellbeing or are simply the result of capital accumulation-driven economic structures.
- Whether advancement towards a more equal distribution of work, responsibilities, and access to resources is observed within the household and at the community level.

Understanding local development within structural conditions: It was previously argued that structural conditions should not be disregarded when discussing synergies between migration and local development. When these conditions are not acknowledged, social realities cannot be adequately understood. For instance, the impact of remittances on local development and food security in Filipino villages cannot be fully grasped if the global free trade in subsidized agricultural products is not taken into account.

Moreover, if structural conditions are not tackled, migration can become an ongoing process, with phenomena such as replacement migration, circular migration and remittance-dependency confirming its inability to promote real development. Local development should thus be seen in terms of either: (a) Opportunity scenarios within structural constraints; (b) Already-ongoing processes that are “building” development; or (c) Initiatives that respond to local needs, are led by local actors, and use locally available resources.

