Rethinking social remittances and the migration-development nexus from the perspective of time

PEGGY LEVITT*
DEEPAK LAMBA-NIEVES**

Abstract

This article explores how the conceptualization, management, and measurement of time affect the migration-development nexus. We focus on how social remittances transform the meaning and worth of time, thereby changing how these ideas and practices are accepted and valued and recalibrating the relationship between migration and development. Our data reveal the need to pay closer attention to how migration's impacts shift over time in response to its changing significance, rhythms, and horizons. How does migrants' social influence affect and change the needs, values, and mind-frames of non-migrants? How do the ways in which social remittances are constructed, perceived, and accepted change over time for their senders and receivers?

Keywords: Social remittances, migration, time, development, transnational.

Introduction

Despite decades of research, migration scholarship still seems to struggle with some of the same age-old questions. False dichotomies between emigration and immigration, conspicuous consumption versus productive investment, or social inclusion and exclusion still plague many debates. Social scientists primarily concerned about macro-level trends talk past those working on the everyday, lived experience of migration and vice versa. These problematic and generally unproductive divisions prevent us from moving forward. We need to formulate more meaningful questions that can produce more constructive answers, and reframe these debates in more generative and engaging ways.

We believe that scholarship has not paid enough attention to several key factors including: (1) the uneven distribution of migration's costs and rewards across families and communities, (2) the role of informal or illegal activities in socioeconomic mobility, (3) critical approaches to development, and (4) how time figures into migration projects and outcomes.

Our recent work, individually and together, focuses on these unexplored areas. For nearly twenty years, we have been doing research in one transnational community spanning the Dominican Republic and Boston that Levitt wrote about in "The Transnational Villagers." Her most recent visit was in 2004. In January 2009, Lamba-Nieves began work on hometown associations, development, and state-society relations in this same community, Boca Canas-

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* Peggy Levitt is affiliated with Wellesley College and Harvard University, USA.
E-mail: plevitt@wellesley.edu.
** Deepak Lamba-Nieves is affiliated with MIT and the Center for the New Economy, USA.
E-mail: deepakln@mit.edu.

ta, as well as in the neighbouring villages of Villa Sombrero and Villa Funda-ción. Since then, he has completed over 70 in-depth interviews with residents of these communities living in the United States and in the Dominican Re-public. He has also interviewed national and city government officials, consu-lar representatives, and other community leaders and spent many hours at softball games, celebrations, hometown association meetings, and fundraising events.

In this article, we explore how the ways in which time is conceptualized, managed, and measured affects the migration-development nexus. We do this by focusing on how social remittances transform the meaning and worth of time, thereby changing the way they are accepted and valued and recalibrating the relationship between migration and development. Much work assumes that development outcomes can be meaningfully identified and assessed at a given moment, that has been pre-determined by project guidelines or timeta-bles set by national governments, foundations, or hometown associations. Our data reveal the need to pay closer attention to how migration's impacts shift over time in response to its changing significance, rhythms, and hori-zons. How does migrants' social influence affect and change the needs, values, and mind-frames of non-migrants? How do the ways in which social remit-tances are constructed, perceived, and accepted change over time for their senders and receivers?

Literature review

We live in a world on the move. There are an estimated 214 million interna-tional migrants worldwide, up from 150 million in 2000. In 2010, one in nine people lived in a country where migrants made up ten or more per cent of the population (Terrazas, 2011). One out of every thirty-three persons in the world today is a migrant (IOM, 2011). Both sending and receiving states are waking up to these dynamics and creating new ways to encourage long-term membership without residence and forms of participation that do not require full citizenship (Terrazas, 2011). The fact that so many people are mobile, and that state and non-state actors are taking on new functions and shedding old ones in response, means that migration is not an independent or autonomous aspect of development. Rather, development planners and policymakers need to consider migration as a central cause and consequence of development (Goldring 2004, Castles & Delgado Wise 2008, de Haas 2008, Glick Schiller and Faist 2010, Mazzucato 2011).

Although much of the scholarship on migration and development, and on immigration in general, still privileges the economic at the expense of the social, we are beginning to see positive shifts (Rahman 2009, Dannecker 2009, Piper 2009, Levitt 2012). There is a growing recognition of culture's importance in creating and mirroring successful societies. Bringing culture back into migration scholarship means not only looking at the circulation of ideas, people, and objects but seeing migration as an inherently cultural act. By

culture, we mean context, the discourses and assumptions embedded in institutions, and the repertoires of meanings that are marshaled in response to specific dilemmas and opportunities (Alexander & Smith 2003).

Assumptions about space and time pervade prevailing approaches to development, although not always explicitly. Moving beyond methodological nationalism effectively decentres the nation as the bounded container where development takes place. It reveals that reducing poverty and advancing equity and opportunity within transnational social fields can be simultaneous quests. What we need now is a similar decentering of comparable assumptions about time.

There is some work to draw upon (Cwerner 2001). Sorokin (1964), Gasparini (1994), and Levine (1997) noted differences in how different societies perceive and mark time. Elchardus and colleagues (1987 in Cwerner 2001) contrast linear and cyclical conceptions of time and rigid and flexible value systems. Social psychologist Robert Levine (1997:3) describes cross-cultural differences in the following manner:

> …pace of life is the flow or movement of time that people experience. It is characterized by rhythms (what is the pattern of work time to down time? Is there a regularity of social activities?), by sequences (is it work before play or the other way around?), and by synchronies (to what extent are people and their activities attuned to one another?) but first and foremost, the pace of life is a matter of tempo.

By this he means the rate or speed at which a piece of music or a task is performed, which depends upon the person, the task, and the setting. Speed can be measured over brief and immediate periods of time or over longer sustained intervals.

Another body of work highlights the role of time horizons: how long migrants expect to stay, for example, or how quickly host society members expect them to assimilate (Cwerner 2001). Piore (1979) found that migrant workers were willing to accept poorer jobs and working conditions when they saw themselves as "birds of passage" or as only remaining in a host country temporarily. Roberts (1995), building on Merton's (1984) idea of "socially expected durations," focused on the relationship between expectations about length of stay and immigrant incorporation. If migrants anticipated that they would only remain for a short period, they felt more conflicts between maintaining their ethnic identity and the pressure to assimilate.

Other scholars stress how shared time creates social groups. Piore (1979) argued that immigrants traverse recognizable careers characterized by standard sequences. Zerubavel (1981) noted the role of shared temporal references, especially calendars, in creating cohesive and enduring collectivities. Boyarin (1994) distinguished between simultaneity or the sense that others are doing comparable things at the same time and "meanwhileness" where others are simply going about their own business at the same time.

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Particularly important for our purposes is the ways in which the meaning of place changes across time, history, or memory. Much work, for example, envisions migration destinations as places of acquisition and progress and spaces of departure as bereft (Raghuram 2009). Time looks forward to a worldly, open, novel future that is just within reach if the past is left behind or which propels migrants toward a new orientation (Therborn, 2003: 294). This "temporalizing of difference" (Helliwell and Hindess, 2005: 414) means that some people and places get labeled as inextricably stuck or "backwards." To make progress, migrants have to exchange one temporal frame and register (underdeveloped traditional, slow, late) for another (developed, modern, fast, on time). Such a view, writes Raghuram (2009), is ahistorical and completely ignores the changing textures and effects of time. She argues that when Indian physicians moved to the United Kingdom, the resulting brain drain was not just produced by colonial affiliations or post-colonial reconfigurations but by certain forms of attachment and path dependency that created a particular kind of medical mobility.

The disconnection between how migrants and nonmigrants locates their homeland in time is another form of "temporalized difference." Migrants often freeze their homeland to preserve it as a bastion of traditional values and culture, in what Levitt (2007) called the "ossification effect." They need the community of origin to remain a moral touchstone that contrasts sharply with the immorality they see around them and partially compensates them for the sacrifices they make as migrants. In the meantime, the homeland has moved on and changed, often quite willingly so and, in part, due to migration. What results is an ongoing, often difficult negotiation between how migrants and nonmigrants take the measure of their homeland and what they want for it in the future.

In short, writes Cwerner (2001:14):

[…] social life must be seen as consisting of an intersection of various times. These times comprise: perspectives of, orientations towards, and horizons limiting the future, the present, and the past; temporal norms referring to the sequence, duration, timing and tempo of social expected patterns of behaviours, actions, careers, and life paths; symbols used in the communication and transmission of knowledge associated with the change and permanence of events, objects, and processes; a quantifiable resource that is allocated, bought, hired, wasted, coordinated, and used for various purposes; an environment in which human action can be located and change measured; narratives (religious, moral, historical) that express the origins, direction and end (or endlessness) of individuals, peoples, nations, nature, and the world; and embedded times, characteristic rhythms of natural and technological processes, and their far-reaching social and environmental consequences.

He describes strange, heteronomous, asynchronous, remembered, collage, diasporic, and nomadic times, which are slowly deconstructing dominant

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temporal patterns at a global scale, and are challenging sanctioned careers and life paths. "They embed alternative narratives, memories, and projects at the core of global simultaneity, de-territorializing national and world histories alike" (2001:32).

This article takes up these questions by exploring how social remittances shift the way in which time is understood, measured, and managed in transnational social fields and, in so doing, are transformed themselves along the way. But before proceeding, we offer one caveat. We see development as a process rather than an outcome—as much, if not more, about the ideological shifts, behavioral changes, institutional learning and capacity building that occur along the journey to a "development goal" as about the destination. Development outcomes cannot just be measured by composite indices or by when certain pre-established sequential stages have been successfully traversed. Rather, they also make their mark through a variety of small social transformations, at various scales, that wield positive and negative impacts. These changes register in home and host countries in ways that can complement but also compete with one another.

Time, migration and development

The changing meaning and value of time

The residents of Boca Canasta, be they migrants or non-migrants, inhabit a transnational social field. Although they are separated by physical distance, they continue to occupy the same social, political, and economic space. Because goods, people, money, and social remittances circulate regularly within these, even individuals who never move are influenced by and sometimes adopt values and practices from far away. The religious, civic, and political organizations in which they participate also assume new forms and functions in response to the cross-border lives of their members.

Boca Canasta has a long history of strong community associations. Many men and women arriving having actively participated in the community's parent-teacher association, sports leagues or church council. They meet easily and often since these gatherings double as occasions for socializing as well as taking care of business. But for those living in the US, the old adage holds true: time is money. While in the early days of migration, people lived near one another, the challenges of Boston's geography and of finding affordable housing mean that community members now often live quite far apart from each other. They work a second part-time job in addition to their full-time employment. While they remain committed to helping their community, time is more precious and valuable. Not only are they more reluctant to spend it at meetings, when they do, they want these meetings to be efficiently run.

These concerns about effective time management and project implementation get remitted back to Boca Canasta, making them concerns not just for Boston members but also for their counterparts back home. Debates over how fast a project should be completed or how long it should take before it

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becomes financially self-sufficient are common within and across the Movimiento para el Desarrollo de Boca Canasta's (MODEBO) chapters—the hometown association that has spearheaded transnational community development in Boston and Boca Canasta for over 37 years. In the past, when MODEBO took on the building of a funeral home or a baseball field, committee members expected progress to proceed at a reasonable pace and that the project would eventually become economically self-sufficient. How an appropriate time frame was defined varied by the type of project (providing an ambulance service vs. building a sports complex), the resources available (expertise and money) and place (Boston vs. Boca Canasta). But now Boca Canasteros in Boston have grown accustomed to a pace of life structured according to a different regime that is paid by the hour and in dollars. As a result, they often grow dissatisfied when progress is slow or projects take too long to complete.

These shifts in migrants' time horizons contrast sharply with the time horizons of non-migrant leadership—one type of common disjuncture within the transnational social field. Boston members say that it takes too long to get things done while their counterparts complain that migrants have forgotten too quickly how things work back home and the challenges of implementing and sustaining complicated projects in a town with limited means. Conflicts arose, for example, when Boca Canasta-based members repaved the streets at the entrance to the community. Their counterparts in Boston said they should have notified the proper authorities and pressured them to do what they are supposed to do. The Boca Canasta leadership countered that it is not the local authorities who are responsible for repairing roads and that it might have taken years to get the national authorities to complete the task.

These project time horizons shift, however, with large projects that require state support. Time can become a resource if it is used strategically. Because the national and regional governments are often slow to respond, MODEBO's strategy has been to partially rebuild or refurbish their aqueduct, health clinic or school while simultaneously lobbying the state to finish the job. Completing the project too quickly means that the community gets stuck with the entire burden.

In the case of the aqueduct, MODEBO raised over $50,000 in Boston to construct a well that would provide a reliable, steady, and clean water supply. When the time came to get the necessary permits, members could not get the national authorities to respond. They eventually discovered that then President Balaguer was coming to a nearby town for a ribbon cutting ceremony. They arranged to meet with him beforehand, arguing that they already had the money and the land needed for the project; all they wanted were the construction permits. When they were finally granted an audience, Balaguer told them: "keep your money for the well; I'll build you an aqueduct". Not wanting to be upstaged or made inconsequential, the President responded by building a massive concrete water tower. He wanted the community to become self-sufficient but not so much as to make his government superfluous.

A second example of "seizing the moment" or knowing how to use time to the community's advantage is the health clinic that is currently being built by the government on land owned by MODEBO. This new structure will replace an older facility that MODEBO built and operated in the 1970s, until it eventually handed over control to national authorities. Although a woman from Boca Canasta, who now holds a post in the national government, promised to complete this project years ago, it took several years before construction actually began. In the meantime, leaders in Boston and Boca Canasta lobbied strategically without result. They weighed their options carefully: they could refurbish the existing clinic or wait until the government built a costly, modern facility. Because it was a presidential election year, they decided to bide their time and continue lobbying the authorities, all-the-while letting their benefactress know that reneging on her promise would come with a cost. With the election just around the corner, the clinic went up relatively quickly and is scheduled to open its doors soon.

Out-of-sync future visions and time horizons

Boca Canasteros do not suffer as much from an ossification effect as they do from a disjuncture between what the community means to migrants and non-migrants and what both want for its future. Non-migrants continue to care most about basic needs like jobs, education, and health care. Migrants want a place where they can come back to rest, retire, and be buried. As a result, how both camps want to develop the community and what their priorities are has grown increasingly out-of-sync. For example, many non-migrants want to solve the problem of not enough space in the town's cemetery while migrants want to build a sports complex where they can play and watch softball. Some migrants argue that their financial contributions and continued commitment to the community gives them the right to decide project priorities. Non-migrant leaders disagree but worry about being cut off from Boston's purse strings. Rather than criticizing Boston's demands, they highlight the need to devote more funds and energies towards productive investments, like upgrading the primary school and offering job training courses.

These tensions not only reflect differences in how migrants and non-migrants locate the community's priorities in time, they also reflect how and across what time horizon their individual and collective success should be evaluated. Take the example of Josué[1], a Boca Canasta native who migrated to the US without papers, never finished high school, holds down two cleaning jobs, and continues to struggle to make ends meet for his wife and three children. Josué recently made peace with the fact that his chances of moving up the socioeconomic ladder are slim and set his sights on his children. Success for him is being able to support his mother in Boca Canasta and making sure that his children won't have to work as a custodian, as he has. Although he

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[1] Fictional name used to protect the interviewee's identity.

and his wife have made tremendous sacrifices and work gruelling schedules, Josué doesn't regret being stuck socioeconomically or coming to the United States: "I have my children in the right path, they know two languages, my eldest daughter is in [community] college. She's going to start a good major, and has a job [in a bank], and she's a good daughter." For many migrants like Josué, mobility and prosperity are strategically displaced and measured against their offspring's accomplishments, not their own. Their time horizons and definitions of progress are cross-generational.

Time also changes the spaces within which development is achieved. Until recently, MODEBO's Boston chapter was almost exclusively focused on addressing the problems and needs of Boca Canasta's residents since they believed the community "over there" bore the brunt of underdevelopment. Because they believed they would ultimately return, they worked on projects back home. But a sense of permanence has set in and Boston leaders are becoming increasingly sensitive to the needs of their community "over here." Limited job opportunities, blocked socioeconomic mobility, high dropout rates, criminal deportations and gang violence are just some of the problems confronting the community. A recent gang incident in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood that left three Boca Canasta youth dead led some of MODEBO's members to urge the Committee to include crime and violence prevention as part of its community development work. As time has passed, and permanent settlement has become a reality, the spaces of development now include where migrant members of the community live.

Project and participatory sustainability

Our last point reveals the need to look at development over time. For MODEBO, maintaining a stable group of volunteers who work together consistently through ups and downs has been a constant challenge. Although the group has completed numerous projects over the years, its activism comes in fits and starts. There have been periods of concentrated, united efforts, followed by periods of inactivity and division. Catalytic events like Hurricane David in 1979 or the initiation of a major project can mobilize support but keeping people interested and involved during "downtimes" has been difficult. Therefore, at any point in time, Boca Canasta can look like a powerhouse of commitment and energy or a community that does little to shape its own future.

Periods of inactivity often result from differences between home and host community members over what kinds of projects should be undertaken and how. In the late 1990s, a group of young migrants decided to renovate the baseball field in Boca Canasta despite non-migrants' protests that it was not a priority. The Boston group pressed ahead without help from non-migrant members, which ultimately led to disagreements about project management and a breakdown in communication and cooperation. Although MODEBO

eventually completed the project, the rift led to a period of inactivity on the part of migrants and divisions between some leaders persist to this day.

There is also the issue of whether projects themselves are sustainable. Migrants have often taken on projects designed to replicate the kinds of services they have grown accustomed to in the United States. While, for them, things like ambulances and sports complexes have become part and parcel of what governments do, non-migrants sometimes see these as frivolous and inopportune because they fail to meet what they consider to be basic needs.

In 2009, for example, Boston members decided that having an ambulance service was a public health necessity—patients could no longer be transported in cars and pickup trucks during an emergency. But they failed to anticipate just how complicated such a project could be. They assumed that the service would begin as soon as the vehicle was purchased and shipped to the island. They quickly realized, however, that they overlooked a series of questions such as: who would drive it, where would it be kept, and who would pay for the service? While non-migrant members proceeded with caution, or *al paso*, to try to resolve these challenges, Boston members complained that they moved too slowly. They lamented the "months of debates and quarrelling" spent trying to figure out how to get the ambulance service up and running. Some members stopped attending meetings altogether, frustrated by the delays caused by non-migrant members who were dragging their feet.

It took several months for the ambulance to carry its first passenger. Since then, the vehicle has made very few trips because gas and maintenance cost too much for most residents. In some cases, MODEBO's leaders in Boca Canasta have had to subsidize the service, adding to the sizeable financial burden that already saddles the organization. Almost three years into the project, members in Boca Canasta and Boston agreed that, given the challenges, selling the vehicle would be the best option. Reflecting on the experience, MODEBO's member's realized that Boston's leaders made hasty decisions without prior consultation, and were unrealistic about the sustainability of the project. Their ideas about what the community needed and how to meet those needs were out-of-sync with its current day-to-day reality.

Finally, over time, migrants and non-migrants have all become acutely aware that not all social remittances are positive. In addition to lower corruption, more transparency, and greater efficiency, crime, drug use, violence, and a tendency to depend on "quick fixes" rather than good, old-fashioned hard work now plagues the community. The patina of "all things from America are good" has worn thin and non-migrants have become more selective and astute about what they will and will not do for their community. They must walk the difficult line between keeping their migrant benefactors happy and doing what their community needs.

Conclusion

Elsewhere, we have proposed and refined the notion of social remittances or the ideas, practices, and know-how that circulate within the transnational social fields where migrants are embedded, with positive and negative consequences (Levitt 2001, Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). We stressed how people's experiences prior to migration strongly influence what they do in the countries where they settle which, in turn, affects what they remit back to their homelands. We distinguished between individual and collective social remittances or social remittances exchanged and deployed by individuals and social remittances that circulate and are harnessed in collective, organizational settings. Finally, we described the potential for social remittance impact to scale up and scale out. That is, not only do social remittances affect local-level organizational culture and practice, they can also influence regional and national changes. Social remittances that affect politics can also scale out to influence other domains of practice such as religion and economics.

Incorporating time into discussions of migration and development enables us to understand better how ideas about development are constructed, debated, and translated across transnational social fields. The examples we offer here elucidate several temporal dimensions of the migration-development nexus including changes in how time is valued and managed during different periods; the challenges of sustaining projects and member activism over time; and how the spaces of development, its goals, and the time horizon within which it is achieved shift. Differing notions of time, and how it is managed and valued, are social remittances themselves. But time also structures how migrants and non-migrants define process and progress in transnational social fields. What gets remitted and what gets adopted or ignored also changes in response. Moreover, the power dynamics that underlie these processes shift over time.

In the case of Boca Canasta, nonmigrant members initially decided project priorities because they were seen as shouldering the primary burden of underdevelopment. Over time, migrants began exerting their influence, suggesting and financing projects that reflected their own needs and priorities. While non-migrants accepted many of these ideas, especially given their financial dependence, they have also been cautious and critical. Now more than ever, they are exercising their moral authority as the permanent residents of their community and primary beneficiaries of community development projects. They are voicing their concerns and suggesting alternative projects that respond to migrant's desires but are also more in line with local capabilities and needs. This allows non-migrants to play for time while home and host-country members negotiate what development means when it is enacted across borders.

Development planners and policymakers need to become what we might call temporally literate. Doing so brings into focus the capacity building, ideological changes and skill acquisition that occur along the way to a develop-

ment goal which are just, if not more, important than achieving the goal itself. Seeing development as a process rather than an outcome that is evaluated across time and space moves us closer to a more nuanced understanding of migration and development.

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