

Concept note for the conference on Social Remittances and Social Change: Links between Home and Host Communities

When a person moves, temporarily or permanently, from one community to another he/she brings along many ideas, values, beliefs, and behaviors he acquired in the native culture. Upon arrival in the host country, the migrant is exposed to a whole new range of cultural prescripts. Successful integration and performance in the new environment requires a certain degree of re-socialization that may in fact challenge or negate the values and beliefs formerly held dear. The migrant must then negotiate and adjust with many new realities. In time, the ideas of the host country may be adopted, to varying degrees, depending on the particular circumstances of the migrant, and may be transmitted back to the home country.

Continued interaction and engagement with the home country is typical of many migrants, especially in the earlier phases of the migration trajectory. Such interaction results in specific cultural diffusion, described by Levitt (1998) as social remittances in the form of “ideas, behaviors, identities and social capital that flow from receiving to sending countries”. Thus, a person’s definition of appropriate and suitable norms may get re-formulated as a result of exposure to the destination country norms, and may span social, psychological, philosophical, political and religious ideas and beliefs. Research from various countries shows, for example, that emigrants can influence the politics of the home country. It has also been recognized that social remittances are not a one-way phenomenon from the host to home country; instead, reverse flows may occur from the home to host country (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2010; Boccagni and Decimo, 2013).

The concept of ‘social remittances’ and impacts on sending countries has attracted a great deal of attention following publications by Levitt. Examples of such scholarship may be found in Nowicka and Serbedzija (2016); White and Grabowska (2019); Boccagni and Decimo (2013); Lacroix et al (2016). Some authors have used a slightly different terminology while discussing the circulation of ideas between home and host countries. For example, Fargues (2011) uses the concept of “ideational remittances” to describe what he considers a wider range of values and models conveyed by migrants, going beyond entrepreneurial values and practices. Fargues analyses the impact of ideational remittances on fertility of home countries from which the migrants originated. Other researchers have focused more sharply on the political dimensions of the process and argue that the concepts of social remittances and political remittances should be viewed as distinct realities (Tabar and Maalouf, 2016).

While cultural diffusion of ideas and norms can occur across time and space in many different ways that may be random and unsystematic, social remittances have specific characteristics and modes of transmission that distinguish them from general cultural diffusion. As described by Levitt (1998) four such characteristics are as follows: (i) Social remittances are specifiable and migrants as well as non-migrants can state how they heard of an idea or practice; (ii) They are communicated intentionally; (iii) They are transmitted through contact between persons who have social ties; (iv) Social remittances occur through a staged process, in which macro level global flows of ideas precede and facilitate the transmission of social remittances.

In many cases, migration is not spread equally across all geographical locations within a sending country. Specific areas and communities demonstrate a higher propensity to migrate than others, partially as a result of social networks that enable and promote the migration of friends and relatives in the home country. At the same time, specific geographical areas within the host countries become home to migrants owing to land and rental costs, government policies about locating migrants, preferences of migrants, and other factors. This historical spatial growth and settlement of migrants results in the development of home and host communities that may be paired together to study the two-way flow of social remittances. Many studies of social remittances look at such pairs in the home and host country to understand the dynamics through which such remittances are transferred and adopted, or not.

The type of migration, in terms of being temporary or permanent, may underlie different dynamics and impacts on the host and home countries. In case of temporary labor migrants who move to the destination country for short periods and live there in relatively isolated worker camps or areas, interaction with the host culture and society may be limited and fragmentary. In case of permanent migrants who choose to settle in a new homeland the migration experience may be very different spanning several generations that continue to maintain ties with the origin country. At the same time, settlement policies of the host country in terms of allowing a path to citizenship (or not) may have an impact on the formation of identities and belongingness which in turn may affect the absorption of new norms that may be transmitted back to the home country.

As the duration of settlement in the host country prolongs, ties with the home country are likely to weaken in the later generations. Values that emphasize individualization may predominate over those related to extended family ties. In other cases, such ties may continue for fairly long durations.

Financial remittances usually form an intrinsic and fundamental dimension of exchanges between home and host country actors. The reasons for such remittances may fall along a wide spectrum consisting of motivations such as family support, investment, philanthropic contributions, and many others. Each of these exchanges carry a social meaning where cultural expectations and obligations are being met (Rahman et. al, 2014; Gallo, 2013; Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou, 2017; Mata-Codesal, 2013). Financial remittance receipts may be crucial for the survival of the family, and may expand its ability to consume additional resources such as better quality food, education of its children, or use of health care services. Remittance receipts may also be personally empowering for those left behind, enabling additional expenditure on socially valued items and events. Alternatively, disagreements on sharing such receipts may result in conflict between family members. Thus, economic remittances may be embedded within a wide range of obligations and pressures. Research on the social meaning and sociocultural impacts of financial remittances, however, remains scanty (Tuccio and Wahba, 2020).

Social remittances may be transferred at the individual, family, community, or institutional level. The extent to which social remittances are transmitted from the host to home country may vary according to many factors including the acceptability of foreign norms in the local culture, the frequency of contact, the size of the network, personal benefits derived from such remittances, the

status and prestige of the person initiating such remittances, and the power relations between sending and receiving countries (Christiansen, 2012; Levitt, 1998).

Social remittances transmitted by migrants may have varying impacts on the communities and families in home and host countries. Impacts on development in the home country may be positive or negative depending on a wide range of circumstances and factors; some members of the home country may view these remittances positively while others view them negatively (Montefrio et al, 2018). Research on such social remittances remains especially weak, unlike the research on financial remittances.

In terms of the methodological strategies, research on social remittances and consequent social changes in the home (or host) country are usually based on qualitative, in-depth, and sometimes longitudinal studies. In some cases, narratives by a small number of migrants are used to understand the dynamics through which social remittances are transferred from host to home countries and received there (e.g., Christiansen, 2012;). Other research uses ethnographic evidence from the migrants and their home localities (Zotova and Cohen, 2016), or in-depth case studies of migrants (Brown, 2016). However, some authors have used survey data to understand the impacts of migration on attitude and behavior changes in the home country. Some examples consist of the study of Poland by White (2016), and of Morocco by Tuccio et al., (2019).

Social remittances are likely to occur in all countries where international migrants leave the home country to reside in another country, permanently or temporarily. Like several other countries, Pakistan has a long history of migration with a diaspora presence in a wide array of countries, estimated at a stock of about 9 million in 2021. The country witnessed large scale migration at the time of its creation in 1947. It has sent many permanent migrants to North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. A spike occurred in outward flows of migrants from Pakistan in the early 1970s when temporary labor migrants started going to the oil-rich Gulf countries, and the annual outflows have generally shown an upward trend with some fluctuations. This phenomenon has continued till present with an estimated total outflow of about 11.6 million labor migrants, at least half of whom have returned over the years. The two years following the Covid-19 pandemic have witnessed major declines in the annual outflow of migrant workers. Some research has been published on the socio-economic impacts of overseas migration, but the varied impacts of social remittances on Pakistan and other Asian countries still remain under-researched.

The specific objectives of the international conference are to:

- 1) Enhance our understanding of the types, nature, and frequency of social remittance diffusion between individuals, families and communities in the home country and host countries in Europe, North America, the Gulf, and other parts of the world.
- 2) To gauge the major social changes and outcomes that may have resulted from the diffusion of social remittances, focusing on the home country as well as the host countries.

- 3) To assess the development impacts that the above may have generated, in order to suggest any policy guidelines that may aid such development in future.

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