Transnational Development Agency of Migrants: Problematic Aspects of Research on Remittances

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Abstract
The globalisation debate is predominantly dealing with the intensity of the phenomenon and its influences upon the societal, political and economic structures. The neo-liberal perspective of globalisation highlights the spread of a unified global economic system and its increasing influence upon the state. This mono-causal explanation of globalisation unevenly emphasizes the economic background of global processes – including migration. In this sense migrants are seen purely as a labour force, motivated by a desire to increase their income and lower economic risks. The rational analysis of migrant behaviour is also applied upon their remitting activities which are predominantly researched in the quantitative categories of volume or share of GDP.

This paper joins the critique of the economy-based quantitative approach which is seen as overly simplifying. It provides the analysis of prevailing scientific investigation on the issues of migration and remittances and introduces alternative qualitative research methods involving the social aspects of remitting such as motivation, targeting or networks of cooperation. In this way the potential for understanding the developmental consequences of remittances is extended; enabling wider understanding of the complex networks created in the processes of global migration.

Key words: economic theories of globalisation, migration, transnationalism, remittances, social remittances, development

Introduction
There are different views on the intensity, scale, causes and periodization of globalisation. The differences are caused mainly by a disagreement about the causes of globalisation which divides the scientists into a “mono-causal” versus a “multi-causal” group. In this way D. Held distinguishes two mono-causal theses of globalisation which he labels as “hyperglobalizers” and “sceptics”. Although they have completely opposite views on the current stage of globalizing processes and their progress, both of these theories set the economy as the central cause and decisive force of globalisation. They claim the global (for sceptics, international) system and its various consequences are primarily originating through the economic processes – namely the spread of a global economic system based on the free movement of capital, goods and labour (Held et al. 1995).

In this way globalisation processes are dependent upon the emergence of transnational networks of production, trade, finances and labour in the integrated global market. The hyperglobalizers claim that there emerge transnational channels of economic ties which are effectively influencing both the regional and supranational levels of life. The national states are unable to enforce further their sovereignty upon the economic and consequent social and political processes within their borders. As S. Strange summarizes: “…the impersonal forces of world markets, integrated over the postwar period more by private enterprise in finance, industry and trade than by the cooperative decisions of governments, are now more powerful
than the states to whom ultimate political authority over society and economy is supposed to belong. Where states were once the masters of markets, now it is the markets which, on many crucial issues, are the masters over the governments of states. And the declining authority of states is reflected in a growing diffusion of authority to other institutions and associations, and to local and regional bodies …” (Strange 1996, 4). Thus transnational companies are able to influence state policies, spatialization of workforce or location of income. International organizations enforce neo-liberal re-structuralization of markets through development strategies and other measures.

The globalisation theory labelled as sceptical is predominantly reacting to the hyperglobalisation thesis by claiming that what is seen as a transformative globalisation process is in fact state-controlled interaction among the national economies which ensures the continuation of economic liberalization. The opposition to the hyperglobalist understanding of globalisation is based on the historical analysis and statistical comparison of flows of trade, investment and labour which proves that the economic interdependence is on comparable levels as in the 19th century (Hirst and Thompson 1999, 19 – 61). The globalisation rhetoric is then seen mainly as a tool for the implementation of the neo-liberal economic strategies.

Understanding Migration in the Context of Globalisation

Disregarding these serious antagonisms in understanding globalisation, both hyperglobalizers and sceptics see the phenomenon as caused predominantly by the spread of a unified global economy based on the free movement of finance, goods and workforce. However such a purely economic explanation of globalisation is criticized by many researchers who point to the fact that the global processes are differentiated and influenced by various activities of economic, social, political or ecological character. In sum, globalisation is of multi-causal character and therefore needs to be researched through interdisciplinary approaches (Albrow 1996). The criticized drawbacks of the economy-based research approach can be seen on the issue of transnational networks emerging through global migration.

Migration is seen as one of the crucial aspects of globalisation, increasing in intensity and variability. The consequential transnational networks emerging between the migrants and those left behind are further intensified by the modern communication technologies. These have an important role in the time-space compression; the decreasing importance of space and distance which is one of the major characteristics of globalisation. Globalisation is therefore a necessary part and also further outcome of the whole process as it enables flows of ideas, money, people and goods as well as provides means of contact, communication, transportation etc (Castles 2004).

The global character of migration leads to considering this phenomenon as a system creating a network of connections between areas of origin and destination and their mutual transformation. The migrant is therefore seen as an individual embedded in certain networks and cultural systems which are transferred during the process of migration (Skeldon 1997; Nyberg-Sorensen et al. 2002). Therefore, though the research is usually concentrating on the transfers from the host country to the country of origin we should be aware of the continuity of the migrant experience which is oriented in the opposite way and influences the outcomes of such transfers. The complex view on migration is expressed by H. De Haan: “Population movements are not economistic reactions to push and pull factors, but patterns of migration are determined by social and cultural institutions embedded in local customs and ideologies” (De Haan 1999, 9).

Drawbacks of Economic Theories of Migration
The transnational networks created by migrants are therefore of complex character; influenced by communities themselves as well as by the state policies on migration and integration in the sending, receiving and transit countries, the integrated global communication technologies and many other factors. In this way transnational networks form an important part of the globalisation process.

The simplifying economic explanations thus neglect the social processes linking the countries of origin and destination and the various forms of engagement between them (Nyberg-Sorensen et al. 2002). This complexity is therefore ignored by both the hyperglobalizers and sceptics who restrict the migratory patterns to simple economically motivated, rational decisions of increasing profit and decreasing risks. Migrants are in this sense labelled as labour force; part of the global economy shifted around on the base of supply and demand, push and pull factors and needs of the markets. Such are the driving forces of migration identified by theories of migration based in the economic thinking (Massey et al. 1993). Migrants are seen as passively responding to forces of global economy with the only interest of increasing financial profit of their own or their nearest family members. Therefore the mono-causal economic understanding of globalisation simplifies the emerging transnational networks to financial and material transfers between migrants and their home countries.

The importance of these transfers lies in their developmental potential which is the main reason behind the booming research on this issue. There are various ways in which migration and development are linked. A lot of discussion centres on whether migration is the result of development or the other way round. Given the complex connection of these two phenomena the simplifying economic approach to them brings biased results. The example could be the sudden political interest in the provision of development aid as the increasing development levels of some countries were seen as a way of stopping the migration flows from them. However especially from the short and mid term point of view this approach proves to be misleading as it is based on the wrong assumption that poverty breeds migration while it neglects the stimulative effects of socio-economic development on migration (Skeldon 1997, 2008; De Haas 2007).

The migrants’ transfers labelled as remittances are defined as earnings and material resources transferred by international migrants or refugees to recipients in their country of origin (THP and UNESCO 2008). Therefore the scientific literature understands remittances predominantly as financial or material outcomes of migrants’ economic activity transferred to country of origin where they are used for increasing the levels of development (Skeldon 2008). In this way remittances are nowadays recognized as an additional source of various forms of developmental resources. However this approach shows the signs of the economy-based mono-causal simplification of the remitting processes. The research of this phenomenon is mainly undertaken by quantitative methods. Already these analyses (including comparison to volumes of ODA and shares of GDP) have proven the positive outcomes of remittances like the increase in economic growth, standards of living, competitiveness and social capital (Maimbo and Ratha 2005; Mansoor and Quillin 2007). Many official bodies take these outcomes of remitting for granted and there is a threat that the individual or community agency will substitute the work and initiative which should be on the agenda of both developing and developed countries’ governments (Uribe and Buss 2008). The matter is further unbalanced as there are serious drawbacks in the institutional and societal structures which prevent the effective use of provided aid.

Therefore the economic assessment of remittances as a developmental tool puts a disproportional amount of responsibility on a proportionally small group of migrants without providing them with adequate recognition and assistance. Concentration on negative effects of migration (e.g. brain drain) and blaming the migrants themselves for the lack of development
can be thus analysed as tactical approach of drawing the attention from the actual drawbacks of the political, economic and aid structures (Skeldon 2008; Newland 2009).

The criticism of remittances also aims at the lack of control, the creation of dependency, and the unequal distribution and consumption use. This attitude omits the fact that remittances are just one part of a complex socio-economic system; their income can therefore release other resources which would be otherwise linked to primary consumption. The analysis of their influences should therefore look further than just at the direct outcomes as there are often secondary ones which are still socially desirable (Skeldon 1997; Carling 2005; Ozden and Schiff 2006). Criticism of remitting also seems to be based on the presumption that there can be one universal solution to the problem of underdevelopment. Remittances can have both positive and negative impacts; however if they are effectively combined with other channels of development cooperation, they should be seen as an important contribution to the development scheme.

**An Alternative Concept of Social Remittances**

The system of social remittances has not been paid much attention so far. In general social remittances share many characteristics with financial remittances: the issue of motivation, influence of existing socio-economic and political networks in both home and host countries and especially the need for an open and flexible system of cooperation; all of which have a critical impact upon the sustainability of the outcomes of the remitting agency.

The main difference therefore lies in going beyond the simplistic optics viewing migrants as market driven economic actors. The actual reality of migration is a complex and dynamic process driven by a mix of social, political and economic motivations. Therefore explaining migration in the context of free market is at least biased as there are present both individual and collective motivations, influences and outcomes (Skeldon 1997; Castles 2000). Concentration on financial remittances also omits all other forms in which migrants may contribute to development of their home countries. The perspective of social remitting enables us to pay attention to activities going beyond material and financial transfers (though their importance is not at all contested by this paper).

In an attempt to grasp the complex image of remitting reality a pilot research on social remitting activities of migrants was undertaken in Ireland in the period of February to March 2009 by the Immigrant Council of Ireland; an independent non-governmental organization that promotes the rights of migrants through information, legal advice, advocacy, lobbying, research and training work. The research was based on a set of basic presumptions:

- positive impact of social remittances on development;
- active role of migrants in the development process; variability of strategies of movement, transfer and co-operation between their places of origin and destination;
- complexity of migration-led development, going beyond purely economic understanding and analysis (Castles 2000);
- determination of form, scale and volume of activities of the migrant by his/her status in both sending and receiving society, level of social integration and ability to reach for available sources of assistance and cooperation in legal, financial, social and community processes and networks (Libercier and Schneider 1996; Skeldon 1997; ICI 2008);

The inclusive definition of social remittances was created, recognizing them as material and nonmaterial transfers such as skills, know-how, knowledge, techniques, methods and values used for and by the wider community exceeding the family relationships; submitted by individuals or groups of international migrants or refugees and used in various forms of collective projects with the motivation of giving back to the community and improving its welfare (THP and UNESCO 2008; ICI 2009). Such understanding of remitting activities
makes possible a much wider approach to the issue and its complex analysis, including the social aspects of the transnational networks.

The qualitative approach was accepted as the research so far was concentrating mainly on the hard migration data and volumes of the remittance flows. Aiming on the unexplored topic of social remitting the qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews was used to allow appropriate narrative space for the interviewees. The qualitative research aiming on individual experience also enabled deeper insight into the topic of social remittances, their variety and processes connected to them. The use of qualitative methods for research also enables us to grasp the non-quantitative character of social remittances (Libercier and Schneider 1996).

Based on the basic presumptions the research identified the actual forms of social remitting and their organization, motivation and networks of cooperation as the main aspects of migrants’ agency. The final analysis has proven the immense development potential of the social remitting projects as these posses the main characteristics of currently appraised post-developmental approach to aid delivery. The migrants concentrate on creating and supporting community-based, sustainable and small scale projects aiming on the establishment of alternative power channels enabling the empowerment of local communities otherwise neglected by the state or ODA structures. Leaving aside this potential, the migrants themselves do not label their activities as specifically developmental. This fact might be connected with their motivation for the activity as the pilot research identified motivations varying from religious reasons to philanthropy. Rather than to development as such the migrants connect their remitting agency primarily to their beliefs, need of giving back to their native community or will to further spread the spirit of voluntarism and use gained experience.

Other important data, which would be otherwise neglected by the quantitative analysis, regarded the issue of available networks of cooperation in both the host and home country. The countries of origin and especially the local communities are quite opened to participation in migrant-led projects, although there might arise an opposition to programs promoting cultural change (e.g. the empowerment of women). On the other hand the migrants have higher chances to be effectively active in states which otherwise isolate themselves from international development cooperation (e.g. Algeria) or where the official development and state structures are prone to corruption (e.g. Pakistan, Zimbabwe).

The case of Ireland showed that even the developed, democratic countries, where the migrants and refugees head to and from where they later organize the remitting projects, have severe problems with an effective incorporation of these activities to own developmental structures. The migrants have to deal with issues of trust and create a “good reputation” on a long term basis before they are recognized as actors in the development sector. This fact is connected to the prevailing negative imagery of migrants in the media and the public opinion as they are often labelled as passive recipients of state social welfare and their variable social activities are predominantly neglected. Their negative imagery can be also linked to the overall passive imagery of developing countries receiving the development aid without own initiative. The migrants are thus seen as representatives of these countries and the generalized prejudices lead to discrimination against their activities.

Conclusions

The goal of this paper was to highlight the insufficiency of the economy-based theories for investigation of the complex reality of social, economic, political, cultural and environmental factors of the phenomenon of globalisation and their consequences on the individual, state and transnational levels. The emergence of alternative approaches notwithstanding, they prevail in research on the global issues which leads to the omission of
many aspects of the transnational reality. Although the qualitative, interdisciplinary approaches are supported by globalisation theorists, their development and application in research is still rather complicated as the new approaches need to be further tested and prove their validity.

An example of such alternative research approach is the concentration on the social aspect of remitting agency of migrants. The pilot research on social remittances proved that further research on the issue can help to replace the economic view on migrants by the one recognizing their personal agency, intellectual, manual and organizational skills, experience and expertise. Further research may therefore achieve the full recognition of migrants as agents of development and gain access to their abilities and experiences to various development bodies. Such approaches should be supported by the need of grasping the complexity of migrant agency which in many ways possesses the currently proposed characteristics of post-development tactics of self-empowerment led by the developing communities themselves. Therefore the social remittances provide a chance of creating alternative to ODA structures struck by inefficiency, administrative costs and bureaucracy.

Overall it is clear that the processes linking migration and development are complex and highly influenced by all the actors included; this fact should be reflected by any further research. In this way it is possible to reflect that though the transnational networks seem to be influenced by various policies and structures they are still created and changed by the individuals.

References


