

Remittances, Migration and Social Development

A Conceptual Review of the Literature

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Acronyms

GDP	gross domestic product
NELM	new economics of labour migration

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Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

This paper reviews the empirical literature on the relationship between remittances and various dimensions of social development in the developing world within a broader conceptual framework of migration and development theory. Migration and remittances are generally part of risk-spreading and co-insurance livelihood strategies pursued by households and families. Migration and remittances also have the *potential* to improve well-being, stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty directly and indirectly, while their effects on inequality are much more ambiguous.

The significant empirical and theoretical advances that have been made over the past several decades highlight the fundamentally *heterogeneous* nature of migration-remittance-development interactions, as well as their contingency on spatial and temporal scales of analysis, which should forestall any blanket assertions on this issue. Notwithstanding their often considerable blessings for individuals, households and communities, migration and remittances are no panacea for solving more structural development problems. If states fail to implement general social and economic reform, migration and remittances are unlikely to contribute to nationwide sustainable development. Migrants and remittances can neither be blamed for a lack of development nor be expected to trigger takeoff development in generally unattractive investment environments. Therefore, policies aimed at increasing people's welfare, creating functioning markets, improving social security and public services such as health and education are also likely to enhance the contribution that migration and remittances can make to social development.

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Résumé

Ce document passe en revue la littérature empirique sur la relation entre les envois de fonds des émigrés et les diverses dimensions du développement social dans les pays en développement dans le large cadre conceptuel de la migration et de la théorie du développement. L'émigration et les envois de fonds des émigrés font généralement partie des stratégies de diversification appliquées par les ménages et les familles pour réduire les risques et s'assurer collectivement contre la perte de moyens d'existence. Ils *peuvent* aussi améliorer les conditions de vie, stimuler la croissance économique et faire reculer la pauvreté directement et indirectement, alors que leurs effets sur l'inégalité sont beaucoup plus ambigus.

Les importantes avancées empiriques et théoriques qui ont été faites au cours des dernières décennies mettent en lumière la nature profondément *hétérogène* des interactions entre les envois de fonds des émigrés et le développement, ainsi que le fait qu'elles varient selon les grilles d'analyse spatio-temporelle choisies, ce qui devrait prévenir toute affirmation générale sur la question. Bien qu'ils présentent souvent des avantages considérables pour les individus, les ménages et les communautés, l'émigration et les envois de fonds ne sont pas une panacée aux problèmes structurels du développement. Si les Etats ne parviennent pas à mener à bien une réforme sociale et économique générale, l'émigration et les envois de fonds des émigrés ont peu de chances de contribuer à un développement national durable. On ne peut pas leur reprocher l'insuffisance du développement ni s'attendre à ce qu'ils relancent le développement lorsque les conditions sont généralement peu attrayantes pour les investisseurs. En conséquence, les politiques visant à améliorer les conditions d'existence de la population, à organiser le fonctionnement des marchés, à améliorer la sécurité sociale et les services publics dans des domaines tels que la santé et l'éducation sont aussi de nature à valoriser ce que la migration et les fonds envoyés par les émigrés apportent au développement social.

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Resumen

En este documento se analiza la bibliografía empírica sobre la relación entre las remesas y las diversas dimensiones del desarrollo social en el mundo en desarrollo, en el contexto de un marco conceptual más amplio de migración y teoría del desarrollo. La migración y las remesas generalmente forman parte de las estrategias de dispersión del riesgo y aseguramiento compartido de la subsistencia que ponen en práctica los hogares y las familias. Igualmente, la migración y las remesas tienen el *potencial* de mejorar el bienestar, estimular el crecimiento económico y reducir la pobreza directa e indirectamente, si bien sus efectos sobre la desigualdad son mucho más ambiguos.

Los importantes avances empíricos y teóricos que se han registrado en las últimas décadas subrayan la naturaleza fundamentalmente *heterogénea* de las interacciones entre la migración, las remesas y el desarrollo, así como su dependencia de las dimensiones espaciales y temporales de análisis, por lo que no es posible hacer afirmaciones generales sobre este tema. No obstante los beneficios a menudo considerables que representan para las personas, los hogares y las comunidades, la migración y las remesas no son la panacea que ha de permitir resolver los problemas más estructurales de desarrollo. Si los estados no logran poner en marcha una reforma social y económica general, es poco probable que la migración y las remesas contribuyan al desarrollo sostenible de toda una nación. No puede culparse a los migrantes y las remesas por la falta de desarrollo, ni puede esperarse que sean los catalizadores del desarrollo en entornos de inversión generalmente poco atractivos. Por lo tanto, las políticas dirigidas a incrementar el nivel de bienestar de la población, a crear mercados que funcionen y a mejorar la seguridad social y los servicios públicos como la salud y la educación, también pueden contribuir a mejorar el aporte que la migración y las remesas pueden hacer al desarrollo social.

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1. Introduction

In the past few years, there has been a remarkable renaissance in the interest in remittances. This interest has undoubtedly been triggered by a striking increase in remittance flows: after years of relative neglect, they have been rediscovered as a potential source of development finance. Remittances sent back to developing countries rose from \$31.1 billion in 1990 to \$76.8 billion in 2000 to no less than \$167.0 billion in 2005. Registered remittances now amount to well over twice the amount of official development assistance and are 10 times higher than net private capital transfers to developing countries (Kapur and McHale 2003).

However, the current debate on migration, remittances and development suffers from a number of shortcomings. First of all, the current “remittance euphoria” often coincides with a certain perception that it concerns a “new” issue. However, any suggestion that the topic is new testifies to a striking level of amnesia of decades of prior research and policies on this issue. Lest we reinvent the wheel (Russell 2003), we should not lose sight of the findings from previous empirical research and policies on migration, remittances and development.

Second, there has been a one-sided focus on remittances and their direct economic consequences. Less systematic attention has been paid to the non-pecuniary consequences of remittances, such as their impact on health, education, gender, care arrangements and social structures and ethnic hierarchies in migrant communities and countries. There has also been less attention paid to the non-remittance-related impacts of migration, such as the role of migration and migrants in cultural and social change in origin societies (see also Levitt 1998).

Related to the two previous points is the observation that the recent empirical and policy literature on remittances has been poorly embedded in more general theoretical frameworks on migration and development. Many empirical studies have not been designed to test hypotheses and, even more important, make no reference to broader theoretical debates on migration and development at all. This renders the often conflicting findings from empirical studies difficult to interpret theoretically, when in fact they could be extremely useful in building more sophisticated theoretical frameworks that could account for the heterogeneity of migration-remittances-development interactions.

Adding to that, although migration research cuts across many academic disciplines, there is often very poor communication across disciplinary boundaries. For instance, the high level of synergy between the *new economics of labour migration* and *livelihood approaches* toward migration, remittances and development (see the next section) has largely gone unnoticed, whereas the combination of such perspectives could create significant empirical, disciplinary and theoretical cross-fertilization.

More fundamentally, and perhaps even more striking, is the almost total absence of a foundational debate in migration studies on what the concept of “development” actually means. While the concept of development is almost never explicitly defined, most approaches toward migration and development tend to be based on notions of development that focus on (gross) income indicators. Consequently, research on migration and development has been focusing on the impact of remittances on income growth and investments in productive enterprises, although there has been increasing attention paid to the effect of remittances on poverty alleviation and inequality.

This conventional focus is arbitrary, since remittances and, more generally, migration, impact on a wide range of societal issues beyond income. These may include their impact on income risks (rather than levels alone), income inequality, investments in human capital (for example, education), gender inequality, birth and death rates, ethnic relations, political change, the environment and so on. Migration impacts may also differ significantly across these various dimensions of social and economic change. Therefore, evaluating “the” impact of migration and remittances is far from straightforward, as this depends on which dimensions of socioeconomic change are considered as developmental and the relative weight attached to them. What is seen

as developmental, moreover, depends on the disciplinary, cultural and ideological perspectives of researchers and policy makers, who tend to project their own norms, preferences and expectations—for instance, on appropriate styles of consumption, housing and investments—onto the communities and societies that they study.

The focus on income growth is also peculiar because social and economic dimensions of development are fundamentally interrelated. Changes in social relations and the well-being and human capital of people also affect their productivity, freedom of choice and the capacity to participate in public debate, and vice versa. The influence of migrants on political reform in origin countries can also affect the general investment climate.

Sen (1999) offered a more comprehensive approach to development by conceiving it as the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. In order to operationalize these “freedoms”, Sen used the concept of human capability, which relates to the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance their substantive choices. The basic assumption here is that the expansion of human capabilities adds to the quality of people’s lives. Sen’s capabilities approach contrasts with narrower views of development that are largely, if not uniquely, restricted to income indicators (for example, gross national product per head) and material growth. His understanding of development includes elements such as social well-being, poverty alleviation, income inequality, gender equality and universal access to primary education, health care and meaningful employment.

Sen (1999) argued that income growth itself should not be the litmus test for development theorists, but instead the question of whether the capabilities of people to control their own lives have expanded. While acknowledging that incomes can have a high potential to contribute to the expansion of the real freedoms people enjoy, Sen maintained that the relationship between income and human development is by no means direct or automatic, making income indicators alone an inadequate indicator of the quality of people’s lives. He argued that *freedom* is central to the process of development for two reasons. First of all, there is the *intrinsic* importance of human freedoms as an objective of development, which has to be clearly distinguished from the obvious *instrumental* effectiveness of freedoms of different kinds in contributing to economic progress. Thus, the value of such freedoms should not only be judged by their income-generating capacity, but should first and foremost be seen as the principal ends of development in themselves (Sen 1999).

Applying such a broad view of human or social development¹ to the remittance debate evokes the necessity of looking beyond income indicators, and also studying the multifaceted ways in which migration and remittances affect the well-being and capabilities of people in migrant-sending societies. This also points to the importance of looking not only at how remittances affect migrants and their families, but also how they affect sending communities and societies *as a whole*. How do remittances affect equity and inequality in social and economic opportunities within communities? Do remittances increase people’s capabilities to protect themselves from

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