

Migrant Social Networks: Vehicles for Migration, Integration, and Development

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FEATURE

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Social networks are utilized every day throughout the world by family, friends, community members, businesses, organizations, government agencies, and a wide range of others. But not all social networks are created equal.

Migrant social networks are quite different from others in terms of their composition, how they are used, and the effect they have on the lives of millions of people currently living and working away from home. While the notion that social networks play a role in one's life may seem quite obvious, the importance of migrant networks in affecting outcomes for migrants, their families, and their communities cannot be overstated.

This article is meant to serve as a primer on migrant social networks as one of the fundamentals of the migration process, and will discuss what they are, what they mean, and why they are important.

What is a Social Network?

A social network is made up of individuals and organizations, often called “nodes,” which are tied together by different sorts of relationships, such as friendship, economic exchange, influence, and common interests.

An individual person can think of him or herself as a node that has ties to kin, community members, schoolmates, and colleagues, as well as to larger religious, political, educational, and state institutions.

Networks are different from groups or communities in that they do not have closed boundaries. They are, in principle, open configurations of relationships that can encompass groups and communities, among other social formations.

What Are Migrant Networks and How Are They Different?

Migration researchers have typically defined migrant networks as interpersonal ties linking kin, friends, and community members in their places of origin and destination. But other kinds of social ties also exist for migrants.

Many migrants have ties to institutions and organizations that help them to migrate, get jobs, or adjust to society in the destination country in other ways. Such institutions might include universities, diaspora organizations, government and nongovernmental organizations, private employment agencies, corporations, religious and cultural organizations, and so on. Some ties, such as those of transnational entrepreneurs, reflect even more complex relationships wherein interpersonal and organizational relations are combined, as is often the case in family firms.

Migrants, then, oftentimes have the same sorts of ties that the native born do — that is to say, to both organizations and other individuals. However, the kinds of ties that they have are very much conditioned by the experience of migration and the processes that they go through as migrants, not only as they move across international borders but also after they arrive in their destination countries.

The most distinctive feature of migrant networks, of course, is that they exist across two or more countries, but they also tend to be somewhat limited and specific in terms of the ties that comprise them. Additionally, the composition of migrants’ networks in terms of native, non-native, and coethnic interpersonal and organizational ties often changes over time.

An immigrants' lack of citizenship may limit his or her access to destination-country institutions and organizations — most obviously to political institutions — but also to opportunities for schooling, housing, and social services. This limitation, of course, varies greatly across different countries depending on the reception of immigrants and their institutional accommodation by states and governments, including the ability to naturalize.

The Importance of Migrant Networks

A migrant's ability to move to a particular destination, find a job and housing, open up a business, participate in the development of their home country, and access health care can all be directly impacted by or even dependent upon the migrant's social network.

In countries of origin, migrant networks affect local- and national-level economies in terms of cumulative brain drain and the remittances received by the family, friends, and other relations (who are also part of the migrant network) left behind by the migrant. On a larger scale, remittances — or, more accurately, how remittances are received and utilized by a migrant's organizational ties — also impact the broader development of origin countries. In fact, the remittance of funds and resources by migrants has a long history that demonstrates the maintenance of interpersonal and organizational ties across home and host countries.

Migrant networks also determine whether and to what extent immigrants integrate into their host countries while also maintaining a connection to their home countries — a process known as transnationalism.

The Need for Social Capital

Terminology

In this article, the terms **migrants**, **immigrants**, **migration**, and **immigration** are used regularly. Immigrant and immigration denote, in most cases, the act of persons crossing an international border, while migrant and migration capture other processes that are traditionally excluded from the specific act of entering another country. For instance, some immigrants return to their home countries temporarily, or migrate between countries in a circular pattern. Thus, migration and migrant are meant to apply more broadly to emigration, immigration, and other types of movements such as return, circular, or transnational migration.

Migration flows around the world are highly selective, as demonstrated by the fact that about half of all movements across international borders take place between developing nations, a phenomenon known as South-South migration. In other words, people do not simply look around the world and arbitrarily decide where they might like to pick up and relocate. Migration is simply too risky for most people to hazard such a move.

Most potential immigrants seek to minimize their risks when they move and consider places where they know other individuals or organizations that can help them to make the trip and settle most easily. Social networks provide the kinds of connections needed to make migration possible.

Such networks link potential migrants in origin areas with others — often family members — in destination areas, or work to connect highly skilled or educated migrants with institutions or organizations in the home or host country that are looking to recruit them. But simply being a part of a social network is not usually enough to make migration a reality. One must also have social capital.

Social capital refers to the actual or potential resources linked to a migrant's social ties — the quality of the tie itself.

For example, agricultural workers from Morocco may rely on social ties to family and friends working for the same employer to migrate and work on farms in southern Spain. Traders from the Middle East might migrate to Venezuela or Brazil with the help of business contacts in order to expand their businesses into

foreign markets. And individuals may join their parents, siblings, or children in a destination country, participating in a process of family reunification that happens in almost every migrant destination in the world.

In each of these cases, social ties are instrumental in making migration happen, regardless of the policies and restrictions of a certain country. Necessary resources, such as information, money, persuasion, influence, and aid must be exchanged within these ties to make migration possible. The relations inherent in the social capital of migrants constitute the mechanism by which such resources are distributed.

This is not to say that a social network offers equal opportunities and resources to all of its members. Many studies have shown that transactions within migrant network ties can often include tensions, conflict, resistance, and capitulation as a result of wrongdoing or broken promises.

Economic Incorporation of Immigrants

The economic incorporation of immigrants provides a useful illustration of how migrant networks can be beneficial and harmful. Much research has shown that immigrants use their social networks to find employment, but the prominence of *ethnic enclave economies* that are visible in many cities — particularly Chinatowns, Koreatowns, and Little Havanas, Italies, and Indias — is evidence of the way in which immigrants have used their social networks and coethnic social capital to participate in labor markets that primarily serve their own ethnic communities.

Niche employment in retail, restaurants, and professional services (accounting, legal, etc.) is common in ethnic enclaves and eliminates the need to seek such goods or services outside of the community. The businesses located within these enclaves typically rely on family and coethnic labor to survive, sometimes setting up conditions for exploitation and conflict given that much of the work is unpaid or unregulated.

Two additional types of ethnic economies are not concentrated in this way. An *ethnic ownership economy* is one that includes business owners and their

coethnic workers who may serve the wider population in addition to coethnics. Vietnamese nail salons in New York City, for instance, and Turks in the garment industry in Amsterdam both serve the general population. Chinese restaurants, which are ubiquitous in almost every city in North America and Europe, are another prime example.

Finally, *ethnic-controlled economies* exist when coethnic owners and employees exert significant power and economic control over a particular industry or labor sector. The bar for this kind of economy is much higher and requires a significant ownership presence, usually above 50 percent, in a given industry. Indian motel owners in the United States are one such case, as they own over half of all mid-size motels in the country. This ownership exerts significant control over the motel industry through specialized associations where Indians fill governance roles.

All three types of the ethnic economies described above rely on the exchange of crucial resources such as money, labor, and information within the network ties of immigrants.

Although these primarily network-driven economies have done much to provide immigrants with employment and to revitalize urban neighborhoods, some immigrants face a lack of upward mobility and exploitation by their fellow coethnics. This reality demonstrates that inequalities can persist within coethnic social ties.

Migrants and Development

A broader lens on ethnic economies, especially ethnic ownership and ethnic-controlled economies, reveals some of the global dimensions of social networks and the economic incorporation of immigrants.

Diaspora entrepreneurship refers to the development of businesses by immigrants who are in a position to take advantage of diaspora policies and organizations set in place by countries that are attempting to promote such entrepreneurship on the part of their nationals living abroad.

This kind of economic development relies mostly on organizational ties between migrants and the governments, institutions, and agencies that are promoting it. And its effects are much more global or transnational in nature when compared with the commonly cited local effects of ethnic economies.

Diaspora entrepreneurs can serve as a conduit for organizational ties between their home countries and countries of immigration. A host of organizations, such as the Mexican Talent Network, The South African Diaspora Network, GlobalScot, Armenia 2020, Ethiopia Commodity Exchange, and Fundación Chile, promote networking, mentoring, training, investment, and venture capital initiatives for development in the home countries of diaspora members. These organizational ties seem to have the potential to impact economic and social development on a far greater scale than the small- and medium-size businesses that comprise local or regional ethnic economies.

Though not always successful or effective, diaspora entrepreneurship has had a significant impact on development in much the same way as have remittances.

In contrast to diaspora entrepreneurship, remittance economies are constituted largely by financial exchange between migrants and their interpersonal ties to family, friends, and community. Some of the largest remittance economies, such as those of India, China, Mexico, and the Philippines, are a result of migration and the financial support immigrants provide to interpersonal ties within their networks. Together, India and China received just over one-third of worldwide remittances in 2009, amassing \$55 billion and \$51 billion, respectively.

Remittances to countries of origin, in addition to other development activities in those countries, are also often facilitated by hometown associations set up by immigrants in their host countries.

Hometown associations are quite common among Mexican, Filipino, and some African immigrant communities in the United States, for example, and have been used as vehicles for funding infrastructural and school-building projects. They are also commonly used for exerting political or social influence in immigrants' origin communities, such as supporting political candidates in local

elections. These activities reinforce the social ties immigrants have back home, and sometimes help build new ties between immigrants and the native born.

Transnationalism

Transnational social networks are comprised of people who essentially live dual lives by speaking more than one language, having homes in two or more countries, or making a living through regular contact across borders.

Transnational activities can be economic, political, or social, and they depend on both interpersonal and organizational types of ties.

For instance, Jain Indian diamond dealers produce and trade diamonds for markets in Antwerp, Hong Kong, Mumbai, and New York, where they have sizable diaspora populations. Additionally, transnational managerial elites who shuttle back and forth between global cities as intercompany transferees have also become more prominent in recent years, as have cases of ordinary immigrants who make repeated trips back to their homelands for social purposes, such as for religious pilgrimages.

Transnationalism facilitates the development and the transfer of remittances to migrants' home countries, and all transnational activities rely fundamentally on migrant networks and the exchange of goods and resources between social ties.

Conclusion

Social networks affect many aspects of the migration process and play a significant role in migrants' lives. Interpersonal and organizational social ties affect who migrates and to which destinations, the kinds of employment migrants are able to obtain in host countries, and the extent to which migrants are able to remain connected with their homelands. Migrant networks foster development in origin countries, create large remittance economies, and are the conduits of transnationalism.

Although migrant social networks clearly hold many benefits, they can also work to disadvantage immigrants by allowing for cultural isolation, limiting their opportunities to coethnic resources, or prompting labor-market

exploitation. Nevertheless, they are a key component in the everyday lives of migrants, and are becoming increasingly relevant to the policy discourse.

Governments have begun to work toward supporting organizational ties within migrant networks, especially those concerned with development activities, remittances, and diaspora entrepreneurship. But there are other policy areas that have not yet benefited from close examination of migrants' social networks and how they impact migration processes.

Immigrant integration, for example, is identified by many as key to migrants' economic and social success in destination countries, and is clearly impacted by the presence and utilization of social networks.

Immigration is another high-interest policy area for many countries, and one in which the influence of social networks might also be considered. Many policymakers have relied purely on economic and legal explanations when speaking in terms of migration flows, believing that immigration is simply a function of supply and demand and that adequate control and legal categorization can successfully regulate the number of immigrant admissions into a country.

A number of studies have illustrated, however, that immigration flows often do not correspond well to economic fluctuations, and legal categories tend to mask the social network processes that drive migration.

In the future, policymakers might do well to focus more on the effects social networks can have on migration flows and the incorporation of immigrants into economies and societies.

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