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The Migration-Development Nexus: Observations from the Second Day of the Conference

Paper summing up the second day of the conference on
'Transnationalisation and Development(s): Towards a North-South
Perspective', Center for Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld, Germany, May
31 - June 01, 2007

COMCAD Arbeitspapiere - Working Papers
No. 31, 2007

Winter, Elke: The Migration-Development Nexus: Observations from the Second Day of the Conference, Bielefeld: COMCAD, 2007
(Working Papers – Center on Migration, Citizenship and Development; 31)

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Introduction

On the second day of the conference “Transnationalisation and Development(s): Towards a North-South Perspective”, papers and discussions focussed on the historical, theoretical, and socio-cultural aspects of the migration-development nexus, as well as on the policy challenges that result from the emerging links between development and return migration in the South and (im)migration in the North. In extending our discussions from the first day of the conference, our focus became more concrete and actor-centred. For example, we moved from attempts to overcome methodological nationalism to questions about banking systems and to the puzzle of how remittances are concretely transferred from North to South. Case studies on Ghanaian transnationalism in (Steve Tonah), international labour migration between Bangladesh and Malaysia (Petra Dannecker), migration and development in sub-Saharan Africa (Annelies Zoomers), and diaspora knowledge networks (Jean-Baptiste Meyer) were imbedded into wider reflections about the history of the migration-development nexus (Luis Guarnizo on the post-cold war world order, Roger Ballard on post-9/11 political challenges) and its theoretical premises (Parvati Raghuram on the complexities of time and space scales, Hein de Haas on multi-disciplinary contributions to the migration-development debate). Furthermore, we discussed the challenges and policy options arising from development-oriented activities of immigrant communities in Germany (Hans Werner Mundt). Eric Leclerc, Christiane Kuptsch, Susanne Kröhnert-Othmann and Nadine Sieveking provided detailed comments on the nine papers and raised new questions: How much political will should we attribute to individual (trans-)migrants? How do we incorporate the theoretical gains of past research into our current studies? How can we address the viewpoints of sending and receiving societies, diasporic groups and individuals?

The following comments are based on observations throughout the second day of the conference. They do not engage directly with particular papers, but rather point out themes and issues that need further clarification and investigation. In particular, I want to underline eight points.

1) What/who constitutes a transnational network?

Who do we study? How do we name the networks we investigate? In our discussions, we sometimes make a distinction between non-governmental organizations (NGO) on the one hand and migrant organizations or diasporic groups on the other. This distinction may be

justified to the extent that NGO usually aim to serve the wider public and composed by (“multi-ethnic”) members of the mainstream society, whereas migrant organizations and diasporic groups tend to be “mono-ethnic” with respect to their membership and targeted *clientèle*. However, it remains doubtful that this distinction is fully coherent. Most migrant organizations are also NGO; some of them construct and operate along supra-national identities (Latinos, Blacks, Muslims). Many NGO are transnational networks; not all (though increasingly more) migrant organizations maintain transnational ties. To avoid the ethnicization of migrants it may thus be advisable to compare them with local “multi-ethnic” NGO, as well as to study what forms of allegiances are created (and how) and to what/whom’s benefit.

2) The racialization/ethnicization of poverty and migration

Markers such as “race”, ethnicity and religion were surprisingly absent from our discussions over the past two days. Although unnamed, these markers are nevertheless present as we generally presume that migrants come from “poor” Southern contexts, move to economically better situated contexts in the North, “make money” and send this money home and/or return themselves one day. From this follows that the migrants we are talking about (e.g. those from Ghana, cf. Steve Tonah) are not perceived as “neutral” agents. Depending on the countries they are coming from and the religions they practice, they become racialized and ethnicized in the receiving societies. Factual exclusion (legal and structural) and the lack of feelings of belonging may impact both their preference for and their opportunity structures of establishing local or transnational ties and networks. Racial and religious exclusion may also impact the possibility for mutual development cooperation. As Eva Østergaard-Nielsen pointed out yesterday, Muslim organizations in Barcelona experience difficulties in establishing opportunities of co-development because potential partners in the “receiving” society reject collaborations with (what they see as) “Islamic fundamentalists”. Two things follow from this observation. On the one hand, we should avoid the “third-worldization” of transnationalism, and bear in mind that transnational ties and networks also exist between the “rich” Western countries in the North: (why) are these viewed as less problematic? On the other hand, we should not forget that migrants from the South become racialized and ethnicized in Northern societies, and that these categorizations may impact heavily upon their choices and opportunities of social and professional *engagement* in the “receiving” countries.

3) Community-based transnationalism versus the “universal” principles of states and markets?

Roger Ballard pointed out that migrants tend to “think long and act collectively”. When they get involved in professional activities they “do it for themselves and their kinfolks”. Furthermore, they rely upon themselves and their kinfolks for practical and financial support. In other words, “transnational networks from below” thrive upon an ethic of “community”. In this sense, they seem to differ markedly from the supposedly rational and universal principles that guide states and global markets. In public opinion and parts of the literature, this phenomenon has been interpreted as yet another example of a secular, liberal, individualist Northern “West” which is threatened by an anti-liberal, communitarian “rest”. It is often forgotten that ethnic identities and kinship-based social networks provide a means of resistance and empowerment. Rather than being rooted in fixed cultural traditions and believes they are “reinvented” to counteract marginalization in “host societies”. Scholars of transnationalism should shed light upon the social relations that turn individual migrants into members of ethnic communities. Thereby, they can help to dissolve the essential dichotomy that is often constructed to separate between “our” and “their” way of life.

4) Timing and the neoliberalization of the state

Like many other participants at this conference, I am highly suspicious of the recent trend (to be observed in policy circles in the North) of framing the migration-development nexus in overly positive terms. Many states are indeed reducing explicitly racist, culture-based barriers to their labour markets, but that does not mean that North/South relations have become an egalitarian playing field. While remittances may be a generous contribution to the economy in migrants’ “home countries”, placing the burden of “development” upon the back of individuals (who are often underpaid and disadvantaged in the respective “host societies”) does not seem a fair and morally justifiable solution. The valorization of remittances, as well as the encouragement of temporary forms of labour migration to Northern countries happens at a time of the restructuring of the state and an increasing responsabilization of the individual for services that were beforehand considered collective goods (education, medical care, pension plans, etc). In Europe, it also happens at a time of restructuring of the educational system and the devaluation – if not abandon – of apprenticeships. If the United States and Canada for a long time have been drawing upon immigrants to supply their demand for plumbers, bakers, carpenters, etc., it seems likely that many European countries will soon follow this

path. Thus, at a point when (some) countries of the South are finally in the position to produce a valuable good that is not a primary resource, namely trained professionals, these are deliberately lured away on the promise of (presumably) higher wages, better infrastructures and greater economic opportunities in the North. Questions are therefore to be raised with respect to timing and justifications: which migration? what development? who promotes it and why now?

5) Gender and the study of the hidden costs of (diverse forms of) migration

The previous reflections demand that we study the hidden costs of diverse forms of migration: who wins and who loses in which forms of migration (circular, transnational, permanent, temporary, etc.), and where does this happen (in the North, in the South, in which social spaces)? The study of the hidden costs of migration also requires that we bring gender back into our analyses. Our discussions suggest that the findings may be complex and contradictory. To mention only some examples: In the North, migrant domestic labourers may allow “Western women” to enter the paid labour force. This can be interpreted, on the one hand, as enabling female emancipation in the North. However, the same phenomenon can also be read as creating the conditions that allow it for “Western men” not to get involved in household tasks – conditions, which are likely to reinforce the *status quo* of patriarchy and reduce the pressure for alternative solutions in this policy field. Furthermore, in the South, on the one hand, transnational female returnees may question traditional gender roles in their “home countries” and thus contribute to female emancipation and development. On the other hand, the opposite to female empowerment may arrive when “disposable returnees” (Luis Guarnizo) – the elderly, the sick, the disabled who are sent back to their “home countries” after their time of labour in the North – need to be taken care of. Particularly in traditional societies, this will most likely be the task of women who are then assigned additional unpaid caregiver functions at home. In sum, the costs and gains of diverse forms of migration are likely to be diverse, gender- and class-differentiated. Detailed studies are necessary to analyse who gains/loses what and when, and which tradeoffs may be acceptable.

6) Dual citizenship and global justice

When talking about the hidden costs of temporary and circular migration one “remedy” comes to mind that may reduce the difficulties, costs, and risks endured by migrants: dual citizenship. Holding citizenship in the “sending” and “receiving” country would help to assure adequate health care, allow migrants to hold property in several countries, reduce visa costs, and lower the risk of rejected re-entry or return. Increasingly, the possibility to obtain long-term residence and/or naturalization is an important factor for high-skilled migrants to choose their country of destination. As an IT engineer, why would you enter Germany on a three year contract when, in the same time, you could obtain citizenship in Canada? However, while dual citizenship may reduce some of the personal costs for migrants it may also come along with collective costs for the sending country. How do we deal with issues like taxation, double voting, voting in a place where one does not (primarily) live and thus does not bear the consequences? In sum, what are the costs and gains of dual citizenship for migrants, as well as for “sending” (and “receiving”) countries?

7) Incorporating knowledge gains

During the conference, there has been a strong concern to learn from the past and to incorporate knowledge gains into future research. This is and will likely remain one of the major challenges in social sciences where “knowledge gains” are not as unambiguous and clear-cut as we would like to have it (and know it from the natural sciences). Even the new trend of identifying “best practices” has its limitations since “best practices” are never value-neutral and are always defined in relation to *particular* political choices and policies. However, we have identified a number of perspectives that can help us to move our research agendas forward while learning from the past. Many of today’s suggestions were related to (and can be found in) Hein de Haas’ paper. Here, an attempt is made to put the specific debate on migration and development in a broader historical perspective on migration theory, and thus to make past knowledge gains available for contemporary research. In order to avoid reifying the nation-state (as a unit of analysis), it was also suggested to study (in comparison) internal migrations (Annelies Zoomers) and to go beyond a North-South perspective by studying South-South migrations (Ludger Pries).

8) The “tip of the iceberg”: Global justice and environmental issues

Absent from our discussions but implicitly evoked by Jean-Baptiste Meyer’s computer animation of a ship/iceberg carambolage (see his paper) are questions related to global warming and environmental justice. These questions are, of course, inherently connected to the migration-development nexus and North-South relations. What rights (in terms of permanent settlement and/or naturalization) do environmental refugees have? How can the rich countries in the North be made responsible for the damage their CO₂ emissions create in the South? Should we, for environmental reasons, discourage circular migration (as well as travel and tourism)? What type of development do “we” want to encourage in the South (and who is entitled to speak to these issues)?