TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY, HUMAN CAPITAL TRANSFERS & MIGRANT INTEGRATION

Insights from Italy

THE LINKS BETWEEN TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY AND INTEGRATION

The ITHACA Project: Integration, Transnational Mobility and Human, Social and Economic Capital Transfers
http://ithaca.eui.eu

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More people than ever before live in a country other than their own; more people are on the move more than ever before; and, more people than ever before have families, social and cultural relations, economic and political activities and engagements in more than one country.

The multi-dimensional and dynamic relations that exist between transnational engagements and integration have been increasingly recognised suggesting that a range of factors affect the capacity and desire of a migrant to be transnationally active and mobile. These factors may include the migrant’s individual characteristics (i.e. their human and social capital); their situation in and attachment to both their country of origin and destination (i.e. the extent of her/his integration at both ends of the migration corridor); and the wider socio-economic and political conditions in both these countries and the migration corridor that links these countries.

Destination and origin countries are pressed to better understand this dynamic relationship between integration and transnational mobility as it may have implications for migration policies, integration policies, diaspora policies, as well as for return policies. More specifically:

- What drives migrants to be transnationally engaged and mobile?
- Which dimensions of integration matter most for migrants to engage in transnational mobility?
- What kind of transnational mobility is more affected by the level of integration in the usual region of residence of the migrant, and in what ways is it affected?
- Which conditions in the country of origin or of destination, or of the migration corridor, are relevant in encouraging or hindering transnational mobility?

Through the research we have conducted in the ITHACA project we have gained insights into the conditions and resources that may initiate, facilitate or obstruct transnational engagement as well as how these may change throughout the life-cycle or migration-trajectory of the individual or their household. We have explored the ways in which instruments, policy measures or wider socio-economic and geo-political conditions – be they from the country of origin or of destination – feed into the intersections between integration and transnational mobility.
HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR RESEARCH IN ITALY

- Immigrants' attachments to their country of origin and their country of destination is dynamic and fluctuates according to life-cycle phase and duration of their migration project; So does the nature and intensity of their transnational engagement.

- Transnational investments develop incrementally, they take place through cumulative transfers, and evolve along with the individual’s or household's needs and prospective migration plans.

- Family motives are the most powerful driver of transnational mobility; Plans to return, and particularly retirement plans, constitute the most dynamic catalysts for transnational economic engagement.

- Regularisation and acquisition of long-term status determines migrants' transnational mobility (frequency, duration of stay) and the ease with which they can invest in transnational engagements either at origin or at destination.

- High levels of integration in the destination society facilitate transnational engagement in at least three ways: they enable the accumulation of resources that can then be invested in the country of origin; they provide a background of security that maximises the chances for success/ accomplishment of the transnational investment as they enable the migrant to gradually prepare and develop this investment; they permit return to the country of destination in case the transnational investment fails.

- Transnational mobility may or may not be associated with transnational engagement. In other words, individuals who are highly mobile between two (or more) locations may be intensely economically engaged in either or both of these locations, or, they may have minimal economic engagement. Similarly, individuals who are largely immobile may on the contrary be intensely transnationally active within the migration corridor for instance via their engagement in NGOs, or via representatives (family members).

- Patterns of transnational mobility, transnational engagement and integration vary between migration corridors thereby underlining the extent to which conditions in the country of origin matter.

- Socio-economic and political conditions at destination matter in different ways to different groups. The economic crisis in Italy has led to a deterioration of the migrants’ actual situation and future prospects (income, job security) and has encouraged the pursuit of alternative or complementary investment of resources (financial, time, efforts) in the country of origin for certain population groups (Moroccans), but less for others (Indians or Filipinos).

- Transnational engagement is practiced individually and for the most part outside state bilateral agreements or international programmes. The outstanding exception to this is the Filipino community in Italy which has formed a tightly knit-network of own initiatives and associations from
both ends of the migration corridor that encourage Filipino investment back in the Philippines, that provide assistance and trainings to Filipino migrants to support their investment and business development plans, and that encourage regular philanthropic initiatives targeting local development projects in the Philippines.

THE SCOPE OF ITHACA

In the Ithaca project we have focused on exploring the nexus between integration and transnational engagement. We consider these as two multi-dimensional social processes through which migrants negotiate their attachments and their sense of belongings to (at least) their country of origin and of destination.

Our study explores the links between migrants’ integration and their transnational mobility through concentrating specifically on transnational mobility for economic purposes, and examining the type of transfers (social, cultural and economic) that are generated through it. We have explored the role and relevance of mobility in this context.

Our methodological approach brings together available micro-level and statistical data, secondary data from official institutions (national surveys or census data), and qualitative research. We interviewed stakeholders in Italy, Morocco, the Philippines and Ukraine and, we conducted a survey among transnationally active migrants between 2013 and 2015.

We interviewed 77 transnational migrants in Italy and in the four countries of origin. We did not aim at a representative sample but sought to find individuals from these four national groups who are transnationally mobile and active in order to gain insights into their migration experience, their integration in both origin and destination, and the motives, obstacles and drivers of their transnational commitments and practices.

EXPLORING TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY

It has been increasingly recognised that people may be physically mobile and anchored/ attached to particular (and often more than one) places at the same time. The simultaneity of mobility and fixity, or the transition from fixity/ immobility to mobility and vice-versa are defined by the individual conditions of the migrant and may lead to a variety of transfers between and within the migration corridors.

Transnational mobility fluctuates throughout the life-cycle and the migration-cycle of the individual. For instance, in the first years after migration, travelling back to the country of origin tends to be rare due to lack of adequate resources to pay the travel costs but more importantly due to the lack of regular status that would permit travel and re-entry. Across all groups interviewed in Italy, the overwhelming majority had had an irregular status during their first years in the country (generally overstaying their tourist visas). They were only able to travel back to their country of origin...
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Once they had regularized through benefitting from one of the various amnesty schemes that have been adopted since the 1990s.

Once the status is regularized and long-term residence is secured then the frequency of travel back to origin tends to increase.

The principle motives for transnational mobility:
- To see and care for family - parents or children who have been left at origin;
- To take care of property and for home-building – mainly for private use and only rarely for income generation;
- To fulfill personal/ emotional needs – bonding with their home-town for themselves or to nurture a sense of attachment for their offspring;
- To provide assistance to their home communities – disbursement of funds raised for emergency humanitarian projects or development projects.

Transnational mobility may or may not be associated with transnational engagement. In other words, individuals who are highly mobile between the two (or more) locations may be intensely economically engaged in their country of origin or they may have minimal economic engagement.

Engaging in transnational mobility in order to explore alternative or complementary work alternatives has been less frequent within our sample. It seems to occur in one of the two following situations:
- Deterioration of the economic conditions in the country of destination (for instance the consequences of the financial crisis) negatively affect the migrant's actual situation and future prospects in Italy thereby ‘pushing’ the individual to seek complementary or longer-term alternatives back in the country of origin; or,
- As preparation for the retirement return migration plan.

EXPLORING TRANSFERS

Transnational engagement and mobility is evidently connected with monetary transfers between origin and destination. The migration project starts with an economic transfer from the country of origin to the country of destination to pay for the cost of the migration. Subsequently, it becomes a flow of remittances from country of destination to the country of origin. These financial remittances are mainly intended for family needs (subsistence, education, medical costs, dowry and costs related to family life events), they may include repayment of debts and loans accumulated prior to migration or taken out to cover the migration project initial costs, and eventually may also include collective remittances (reconstruction after natural catastrophes or war, development projects, charity).

As for cultural and educational capital, in their majority our respondents acquired their formal education in the country of origin so there is a substantial social capital that is transferred from origin to destination at the outset of the migration cycle. However, it is only in exceptional cases that this capital is ‘formally’ tapped into at destination by individuals becoming...
Further readings:

Interestingly, neither are the **skills and professional experience** acquired in the country of destination ‘formally’ transferred back to the country of origin even when the individual is transnationally mobile and active. The field in which they choose to invest in the country of origin is generally unrelated to the professional sector in which they work in the country of destination, so the transfer is not always explicit. – For instance, a domestic worker in Italy who invests in buying land and setting up a farm in the Philippines is not directly transferring skills and knowledge acquired in the home-care sector into the agricultural sector. Although the only evident and tangible capital transfer between the two sectors and regions seems to be the transfer of the income generated from employment in domestic work into the agricultural sector, in practice of course much more is transferred. This may range from management and negotiation skills that she has acquired on the job and that improve her entrepreneurial nature, to much wider and more encompassing social remittances (such as awareness of environmentally-friendly and sustainable consumer practices, etc).

Transnational investments develop incrementally, they take place through cumulative transfers, and evolve along with the individual’s or household’s needs and prospective migration plans. They may be interrupted, blocked or re-launched as a result of developments within the individual’s personal and family circumstances in either of the two sides of the migration corridor, or as a result of wider changes affecting the migration corridor itself (i.e. security constraints, financial crisis, changes in the immigration policies).

**EXPLORING INTEGRATION**

Integration is a socio-cultural process of becoming part of and identifying with the receiving society. Integration also consists of structural dimensions that denote the position of migrants in education, on the labour and housing markets and their legal and factual position with regard to residence, nationality and access to the labour market and social and political rights. Assessing the extent or degree of a migrant’s integration in the receiving society is challenging, as is comparison across time and across countries. The challenge is substantial because of the diverse normative understandings of what integration actually entails, what it presupposes, and how or when it is ‘achieved’. The ways in which integration affects transnational engagement is thus interesting to consider: Is transnational engagement a strategy for migrants to cope with low levels of integration in the receiving societies? Or is transnational engagement actually facilitated when the migrant is highly integrated in the destination labour market and society?

Analysing the Italian data set leads us to conclude that in order for a migrant to become transnationally engaged s/he must be **sufficiently well integrated** in socio-economic terms in the society of residence. By sufficiently well integrated we mean having a long-term and secure legal status (and access to citizenship) and stable employment which allows for an accumulation of financial resources and human capital that can serve as the platform from which to pursue transnational activities. It also means having a sufficiently wide and dependable social network consisting of contacts among the
migrant and native populations in the destination country that offers the individual the confidence to launch into a transnational initiative and a 'cushion' to fall back on in the event that the transnational activity fails or is challenged. Finally, it also means having meaningful attachments and identifications with both ends of the migration corridor; these may be expressed through nostalgia, appreciation of the advantages that each location offers, and active engagement at both locations that may range from collective fund-raising and development cooperation to individual business initiatives.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The factors that we found to matter in the Italian case study reinforce our understanding of the dynamic nature of migration and of the fact that transnational mobility and economic engagement are intricately connected with migrants’ integration in and sense of attachment with both their country of origin and their country of destination.

The motives and drivers of transnational mobility change and take on varied dimensions and levels of intensity in different stages of the nexus between the individual’s life-cycle and their migration trajectory.

Migrants’ integration in the society of settlement is affected by the country of origin through various formal or informal ways. When state and non-state institutions from the origin country offer support and opportunities for association and networking to their migrants, (for instance through developing banking and financial services that facilitate remittances and access to funding, offering trainings and seminars on business development plans, financial management and investment opportunities 'back home', or encouraging philanthropic initiatives), then transnational mobility and engagement is substantially facilitated as the Filipino case in Italy suggests.

There exists much room for future research to explore: the differences in the transnational mobility and engagement of the second generation within or outside their migration corridor in comparison to their migrant parents; the ways in which technology facilitates transnational engagement and investment regardless of actual physical mobility; and the extent to which there may be ‘spill-over’ effects between migrant communities in the destination countries through sharing experiences on transnational investments.

MORE ABOUT ITHACA

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Project website  
http://ithaca.eui.eu

About RSCAS  
The ITHACA project is coordinated by the RSCAS at the EUI which was set up in 1992 to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research and to promote work on the major issues facing the process of integration and European society. Migration is one of its core themes.