

Conference report: "Migration(s) and Development(s) - Transformation of Paradigms, Organisations, and Gendered Orders"

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Conference Report:

„Migration(s) and Development(s) – Transformation of Paradigms, Organisations, and Gendered Orders“

Report of the conference on ‘Migration(s) and Development(s):
Transformation of Paradigms, Organisations and Gender’, Center for
Interdisciplinary Research, Bielefeld, Germany, July 10-11, 2008

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1. Introduction

The conference „Migration(s) and Development(s) – Transformation of Paradigms, Organisations, and Gendered Orders“, held at ZiF, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research at Bielefeld University, convened 41 presenters and an audience of more than 100 researchers as well as practitioners with shared interest and expertise in the facets and currents, the policies and the potential of the two overlapping fields whose diverse nature was aptly captured by the conference title.

It was organised by two sections of the DGS, namely the Sektion Entwicklungssoziologie und Sozialanthropologie and the Sektion Migration und ethnische Beziehungen as well as the Arbeitskreis Migration of the Deutschen Vereinigung für Politische Wissenschaft (DVPW). In the Call for Papers for the Conference the convening associations had asked for contributions which analyse, expand and critically interrogate the new conceptual linkages between migration and development in which highly skilled migrants are seen as development agents while the activities of undocumented migrants and informal transnational networks are more often problematised than analysed. The CfP encouraged contributions which question and complicate the pervasive conceptual unidirectionality between North and South by inviting contributions that present new, original empirical findings and/or deploy transnational and translocal approaches which incorporate analysis of Northern and Southern aspects of the dynamics of migration(s) and development(s).

In his opening speech, Prof. Thomas Faist, head of the Centre on Migration Citizenship and Development (COMCAD) explored some of the current research and policy trends as well as some of the misconceptions and policy implications of the present, renewed interest in the Migration Development Nexus. He pointed out that unlike much of the policy rhetoric suggests, migration occurs alongside and increases with development. Far from the monocausal and unilinear depictions that are frequently evoked in policy driven debates, migration is both a cause and an effect of development, they are positively related.

Significantly, the migration development mantra, a simplifying perspective on the interrelations between the two factors that often negates this positive correlation was coined in the North or West. OECD countries dominate research and a discourse which closely resembles a debate from the 1960s with which it shares a major preoccupation with remittances – yet the main beneficiaries of such policy driven research and analysis are said to be countries in the South or the East. This preoccupation and the unilinearity of the perspective gives rise to remnants of modernisation theory packaged in new guises: Migration is seen as a potential

conveyor belt transferring resources, skills and the “right values” such as democracy and gender equality.

Prof. Faist pointed out that evidence for all of the mantra's core tenets is still weak. Yet the conference was not merely to aim at confirming or refuting them, but to establish a wider framework of analysis that enables the move from a policy to a research driven agenda which situates the title themes as facets of a larger process of social transformation.

The conference was divided into three sections, 12 panels, two of which were plenaries while the other 10 were held parallelly to provide sufficient time and space for the 41 presentations of the conference. While only a selection of presentations can be summarised here, the organisers intend to make a selection of the conference papers available on the website of the Centre on Migration, Citizenship and Development.

Section I: Paradigm Shifts in Developmental and Migration Policies

The first section “Paradigm Shifts in Developmental and Migration Policies” began with the plenary panel on “Migrants as Development Actors”. Its first contributor, political scientist and consultant Karsten Weitzeneggers presented on “Developmental Policies for, with and through Migrants – How can it be done?”. Weitzenegger pointed out that less developed regions suffer from the absence of their migrants while the growing importance of remittances creates questionable opportunity structures for dictatorial regimes: It is possible to outsource social services to the Diaspora and effectively run whole sections of a country on remittances. Nevertheless, the potential benefit of Diasporan developmental activities is immense. They have been active in development for decades, but did not speak the specialist, technocratic language of development agencies, which in turn could not communicate effectively with migrants. While some international organisations such as the OECD position themselves as think tanks providing concepts for policies that foster synergies between migration and development, most of EU activities are still geared towards restricting migration. The GTZ is one of the implementation agencies which have increased their efforts in studying and working with Diaspora communities. This approach is yet to be introduced to other policy areas such as economic policy where most actors still ignore the importance of Diasporas, a fact that was illustrated through an explication of the implicit assumption that foreign direct investment in the East and the South is made by “white men with suitcases”.

In her paper “National Heroes’ or ‘Transnational Shames’? Exploring the development-migration nexus in migrant domestic workers and ICT workers” Kyoko Shinozaki of Wolfgang-Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main analysed the differential discourses on highly and low skilled migrants. Drawing on discourses from India and Poland she was able to show how two groups of migrants who benefited from Germany's lifting of the general recruitment ban on domestic workers and ICT specialists are framed very differently in public discourses in their countries of origin: The fact that migrant Indian IT specialists are praised as important development agents while Polish domestic workers in Germany are cast as servile and shaming their home country exposes both class-based and gendered differences which reflect in differential incorporation into the sending countries development policy. While the mode of incorporation is pragmatic in the case of domestic workers who are disciplined by the moral discourse of perceived shame, it is selective and elitist for Indian IT experts whose activities are encouraged through public praise.

Christl Kessler and Stefan Rother of the Arnold-Bergstraesser-Institut Freiburg presented the preliminary findings of an empirical study on “Democratisation through Migration?”. The study compared 1000 standardised questionnaires of Filipino returnees with a control group of 1000 aspiring migrants. The comparison illustrated the different impact of migrant experiences in democratic (Japan, Taiwan) and authoritarian (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE) destinations. Interestingly, the autocratic climate notwithstanding, the destination of Hong Kong received the highest rating among returned migrants. The findings were summarised in 5 general preliminary propositions: If the democratisation process in the sending country is (1) excessively protracted and (2) if the system is not able to deliver a minimum of economic prosperity for all as well as (3) a modicum of rule of law, labor migration can exacerbate citizens disappointment with democratic processes and thus may impede the consolidation of democracy. If, however, (4) host countries provide migrants with labor rights as well as (5) offer them opportunities to organize and become politically active, labor migration might have a potentially positive effect on democratization.

In Panel II - “The Migration-Development Nexus” Susan Thieme explored possible theoretical linkages between livelihood and transnational migration studies. Both theoretical approaches are in need of expanding their theoretical foundation to enable a better understanding of people’s access to and use of resources as well as of the relationship between subject and society, their socio-economic dependencies. Moreover, a broader theoretical base is needed to be able to extrapolate the results of case studies. Thieme suggested Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice as a promising theoretical approach, whose intention to the interrelations between

social field and habitus can elucidate both the logic of resource distributions and power relations in transnational social networks.

In her presentation “Transnationals in the Margins of Development - Badakhshani Tajiks in Southern Kyrgyzstan” Delia Rahmonova-Schwarz deployed the empirical example of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) to illustrate how the formation of a transnational Ismaili Shia Badakhshani Tajik community and identity has been strengthened by the formation of the AKF NGO. Cultural and religious factors beyond the conceptual limitations of transnationalism as described in migration and development discourse were decisive factors. The findings suggest that transnational communities are often embedded in multiple intricate processes involving places of origin and destination. Research which seeks to uncover the complex web of interwoven factors needs to be attentive to the interaction of cultural and religious factors with opportunity structures brought about by the proliferation of international NGOs.

Section II: Networks and Organisations in Migration and Development

The ensuing Panel IV on Co-Development brought together analyses of linkages between migration and development policy in various European states: Simon Musekamp presented on “Migrants and Development Policies – the French Concept of Co-développement as example for (in-)coherence between Migration and Development Policies”. He differentiated and operationalised institutional coherence, political coherence and conceptual coherence as three distinct analytical foci. Evaluating French migration and development policies along these lines of analysis, a growing institutional and conceptual coherence could be demonstrated. Musekamp pointed out that Codéveloppement did not sit well with attempts at migration management, his empirical findings thus confirmed doubts in recent academic discourse about the feasibility of development policies as instrument in the management of migration.

In Panel V, “Migrant Organisations and Networks” Doris Hilber drew attention to implicitly gendered notions that structure policy discourse around the Migration Development Nexus (MDN). An empirical analysis of philanthropic migrant associations of the Ghanaian Diaspora in the Netherlands illustrated gender specific engagement that led men to carry out more activities geared towards their country of origin while women's philanthropic engagement was geared towards the communities in the Netherlands – nevertheless, women's reproductive activity was also a major factor in the upkeep of the philanthropic migrant organisations whose activities were Ghana bound. Since such differentiations are not part of MDN perspectives on philanthropic migrant activities the MDN overemphasises men's productive work

while women's crucial reproductive work as well as their significant host country bound philanthropic activities are rendered invisible. Hilber cautioned that the policy outcomes of such simplistic conceptualisations could lead to one-sided funding with retrogressive effects.

Ursula Stiegler presented on “Financial Development and Macroeconomic Stabilisation through Remittances? Potential Contribution and Modes of Governance”. This new research project is part of the Special Research Area ‘Governance in Areas of Limited Statehood’ at the Freie Universität Berlin. The paper investigated the potential impact of remittances on financial development and macroeconomic stability. Despite the current remittances euphoria, there is a lack of analytical

and empirical work on these issues. A look at Latin American contexts illustrates policy trade-offs between different policy goals: Offering dollar accounts may increase the amount of remittances held at banks, but it may also lead to macroeconomic instability. This example provides evidence that policies aimed at leveraging the impact of remittances can also cause unintended side effects.

In her presentation on the uses of remittances in the former Yugoslavia, Jenni Winterhagen examined the usage of remittances in the town of Imotski in Croatia. Imotski had the highest outflow of migrant workers in all of Yugoslavia, with 20 % of the population working outside the country in 1971. Their contributions were leveraged for their home town through mandatory contributions to their home districts as well as through voluntary contributions which migrants could target more directly at their villages of origin. The latter contribution took the form of “guest workers” or “remittance factories”, production sites of the Pionirka textile company whose investment was attracted to the region by migrant contributions aimed at creating local employment opportunities for their families. These efforts can be evaluated as only partly successful: While migrants are willing to mobilise large sums for development of their home town, the interest is localised to their specific quarter or home village. This results in investment choices governed by purely economic aspects but also by the interest in accumulating social capital, into which such investments in one's home community translates. This resulted in factories being built in smaller towns and villages with lacking infrastructure that had to be erected through additional migrant investment. As a result of their remote locations, most of the factories were not viable and have ceased production in the wake of the economic transformations in post-conflict Croatia. The differential evaluation by the district authority who saw the scheme as failed and local authorities who saw the construction of tarred roads and linkages to their villages as well as investments in houses and sanitation as major success illustrates a necessary differentiation between local and district level impact. While the latter could not derive tangible economic advantages from the investments, the

former could point to progress being made in terms of local infrastructure. Conclusively, the findings presented a picture of modernisation without development.

Section III: Social and Societal Transformation

Helen Schwenken's contribution to the panel on “Democratisation and Change of Gender Orders” examined “Heroines of Development – Victims of the migration economy: Gendered Knowledge in current Discourses of the Migration Development Nexus”. Schwenken observed two seemingly contradictory discursive trends: While current policy discourse on the international level highlights women migrants important economic contributions and their remit investments in education and health, women are at the same time portrayed as victims of practices of international migration. Schwenken demonstrated that the seemingly contradictory stances of heroisation and victimisation are in effect based on the same core of implicit gendered knowledge that can be identified in policy discourses.

Boris Nieswand's contribution to the Panel on Identity Constructions explored the topic of “Development and Diaspora – Transnational Processes of Identity Constructions among Ghanaian Migrants”. He charted the rise of a new policy discourse on the Diaspora in Ghana, which is evidenced in the elevation of Diaspora Affairs to the ministerial level of the Ghanaian government. Nieswand drew attention to the ways in which the solidarity of the Diaspora is performed through Diasporan funding for philanthropic projects in the fields of education, health and infrastructure. These areas of investment indicate that in the post-colonial Ghanaian context, the two notions of a modernist vision of development and the concept of a remote, yet participating Diaspora which casts itself as both belonging to and advanced beyond the average Ghanaian populace mutually stabilise each other. The localisation of Diasporan philanthropic activities in areas where visibility is guaranteed and the public performance of the donations illustrates the importance of transforming the invested resources into social capital – a logic of investment that may reinforce the marginalisation of rural and remote areas. In closing, Nieswand called for comparative studies on development discourses deployed by the migrant Diasporas of the Global South which would facilitate an understanding of the efficacy of different discourses on migration and development.

In her presentation on “Between War and Peace – the Tamil Tigers and their Diaspora as warring faction and development actor” Eva Gerharz of Universität Bielefeld examined the role of long distance nationalism as a factor in the protracted conflict as well as in development. She demonstrated that the networks of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) are used as resource base for both the conflict and for regional development efforts, with the local LTTE leadership frequently switching between the two modes of resource allocation. The bond of long distance nationalism enables LTTE leaders to switch between war and peace, between conflict and reconstruction in ways that ensure and maintain Diasporan support and a reliable influx of resources. Especially the Tamil Diaspora in the West has contributed to the establishments of modes of interaction that are able to function in and switch between both logics. Gerharz pointed out that this double ability will be utilised as long as the local LTTE leadership is able to retain its position as uncontested leaders of Tamils both at home and abroad through the utilisation and maintenance of long distance nationalism.

In the last paper presented at the conference, Yannick Porsché explored “Cultural Identities in the Spaces Between – Migration as an Opportunity for Understanding the Other and Critical Negotiation of Identities”. He pointed out that although migration is often cast as a destabilising factor, a threat to social cohesion and identity orientations, it is important to highlight migrations' critical potential as a prime cause for a new mobility of cultures and for self-reflexive intercultural contact. He described migrants as an avantgarde whose members develop considerable skills to negotiate intercultural transitions. Porsché ended by highlighting the potential not only of groundedness but also of a degree of uncertainty which can foster reflexivity which in turn enables innovation and creativity.

In their closing remarks, Prof. Faist and Prof. Lachenmann pointed to the importance of conceptualising migrants neither as homogenous group nor as mere object of study but as “knowledgeable actors” in a field of reconfiguring subjectivities. Prof. Faist pointed to the need for researchers to not only position their object and their subjects of study, but to also reflect on their own position within and towards the fields of migration and development: They could position themselves as advocates of migrants and the diasporas, as experts to be consulted for political advocacy or as intellectuals observing the converging and conflicting interests of the actors involved. Each of the positions awards some and forecloses other insights into the subjects.

Prof. Lachenmann pointed out that migrants' visions for their societies of origin and their development may be very different from the ones embraced by the ones they seek to aid. She highlighted the need for more empirically grounded theorisation on the issues explored throughout the conference.

The conference contributions made important distinctions within and beyond the monolithic concepts (“migrants”), preoccupations (“remittances”) and simplistic conclusions (“migration

brings development which in turn lowers migration rates”) of the declining development mantra. Such differentiations beyond simplified policy categories represent important contributions to the wider fields of globalisation studies, transnational studies and development studies. But most importantly, they raise a plethora of new questions that inspire and invigorate a research agenda for analysing the ever more important nexus between the dynamic fields of migrations and developments.