Migrants' Transnationality, Societal Transformation, and Locality: an Introduction

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ABSTRACT

The implications of migrants' transnational engagements for processes of change and development in the regions of origin are attracting increased attention from both policymakers and academics. Rather than addressing the positive effects of migration and transnationality on local development, this special issue suggests a focus on the relationship between this phenomenon and broader societal transformation, thereby acknowledging the renewed importance of place and locality. To this end, this introduction provides an overview of the current debate on transnational dynamics in relation to societal transformation, local development, and inequality. Central to our analysis is the way in which migrants' transnationality engages with the hierarchies that exist between and within localities, and how this reproduces social inequalities. This introduction thus also reflects the key themes that are addressed in the five papers that make up this special issue on transnational dynamics, transformation, and locality. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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INTRODUCTION

Sociologists, geographers, and other social scientists have recently shown enormous interest in the effects of transnational migrants' engagement in change and development in their hometowns. National governments, municipal bodies, and international donors are increasing their funding of migrants' projects that are related to development, trade, and investment. This new attention in academia and public policy has narrowed considerably the view on the positive effects of mobility and transnationality to the benefit of local economic development. In this special issue of *Population, Space, and Place*, we call for a broader discussion on the implications of migrants' transnationality for social transformation and localities, grounded in the following four observations. First, the debate has so far neglected the broader transformations in which migrants' transnationality is embedded. Taking current transformations into account, however, helps understand migrants' transnationality as part of on-going economic, social, and political processes in the age of globalisation, and as one of the wide range of transnational connections that have emerged in recent decades (Castles, 2001). Second, one important aspect of these transformations is the enhanced role of the local scale for the economy and for political governance. Yet, while there is a considerable literature on transnational practices and local development, the consequences of economic and political rescaling have received scarce attention. This has also led to a disregard for the role played by scales other than the local in shaping and interplaying with transnationality on the local scale itself. Third, with its focus on hometown development, the debate has mainly concentrated on the places of migrants' origin and generally

overlooked the role and implications of transnationality on the immigration side. Lastly, the rather narrowed view on development and change has led most research to largely ignore how transnationality arises from, generates, and reproduces social inequalities between different places and for different social groups and individuals.

In this introduction, we elaborate on these matters in order to deepen and broaden our understanding of the relationship between transnational dynamics, transformations, and locality. This special issue takes an approach that puts societal transformations at its centre and considers transnationality as being affected by and contributing to these fundamental changes (Vertovec, 2004). This is premised upon a transnational approach that looks beyond the 'normalised' spatial unit of analysis, namely the nation state (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002; Amelina *et al.*, 2013). From this view, both emigration and immigration localities enter the picture. Yet, rather than replacing one spatial unit with another, our approach acknowledges the renewed importance of place and locality while also taking into account the interplay between the different scales, including the national. As such, we certainly do not consider the increasing importance of the local scale as resulting necessarily from a weakening of the national. On the contrary, rescaling is a process that emerges from the 'politics of scale' (Cox, 1998; Lebel *et al.*, 2005). Interpreted this way, scales are not 'naturally given', but socially constructed, and as such subject to power structures as well as to negotiations. Both states and social actors – such as transnational migrant communities or organisations – gain power when they are able to manipulate different scales. In this vein, we suggest a multiscalar approach to locality and translocality (cf. Brickell & Datta 2011), in which transnationalisation is experienced and acted out locally, yet is not shaped by and does not shape local relations, policies, and processes alone.

Hence, the authors of the articles in this special issue aim to extend the debate on the relationship between place and the transnational connections established by migrants (Smith & Guarnizo, 1999; Smith, 2001; Rogers, 2005; Page *et al.*, 2009; Glick-Schiller & Çağlar, 2011) by focusing on the linkages between transnational migration and locality that account for broader societal transformation (Castles, 2001). The authors look at how transnational dynamics engage with local transformations and investigate the role for the urban economy and local development, the responses and prospects of rural communities, and the transformation of local institutions and social order. In this endeavour, they regard migrants as transnational entrepreneurs, as members of diaspora organisations, and as actors in development cooperation. The analyses observe how the transnational engagements of these groups generate and reproduce multiple inequalities, which originate in the unequal access of migrants to different kinds of resources, the actors and conditions regulating this access, and the differential impact and varying success of migrants' efforts in this respect.

TRANSFORMATION AND TRANSNATIONALITY

This special issue is a response to the plea from transnational studies for a focus on how migration and migrants' transnational ties and practices interconnect with broader societal transformations (Castles, 2001; Vertovec, 2004; Faist, 2009). For a long time, transnational migration research concentrated on the emergence, scope, duration, and characteristics of transnational ties; it is only more recently that the fundamental social and institutional changes have entered the stage (Faist, 2010). This focus points to the deeper changes connected to globalisation, which also involve growing transnational connectedness, while these interconnections in turn affect ongoing transformations (Castles, 2001). From this vantage point, migrants' transnational practices can be seen as an element that is affected by and contributes to deep-seated patterns of change or structural transformation. '[W]hile not bringing about substantial societal transformations by themselves, patterns of cross-border exchange and relationship among migrants may contribute significantly to broadening, deepening or intensifying conjoined processes of transformation that are already ongoing' (Vertovec, 2004: 972). This approach allows transnational dynamics arising from migration to be accounted for not as isolated instances, but as part of the wider processes of globalisation. It can thus contribute to general understandings of contemporary society and broader social theories (Castles, 2010). We discuss

the content of such transformations later in this introduction, but we want to emphasise here that these include fundamental institutional reconfigurations, for instance the rescaling of territorial state power. At the same time, this involves the shifting of social hierarchies related to class, ethnicity, gender, and age, for example, resulting in social differentiation and differentiated access to resources. Faist (2008: 23–25) points in this regard to the more recent recognition of community or civil society as an actor in development. In such a scenario, migrants have become 'transnational agents of development', shaped by interventions of the state.

The role of cross-border migration and subsequent transnational practices in economic development, social change, and, eventually, structural transformations, however, remains contested. Scholars who have carried out historical analyses point to the role of migration in Europe's industrial development. Particularly, the emigration in the 19th century of large amounts of unabsorbed labour to the American continent is considered an important driver of technological innovation in Europe (Massey, 1988). Not all authors agree that migration plays a strong role in social change, however. In particular, when searching for changes in the fundamental structures and institutions of today's developed societies, the role of migration seems limited (Portes, 2010). When Remus Anghel (2016) addresses the relationship between migration and local changes in a post-socialist setting in his study on the multi-ethnic locality Zăbala in the eastern part of Transylvania, Romania, the crucial impact of migrants' investment and subsequent return becomes tangible. Yet, his analysis also shows that even when socioeconomic hierarchies change and these changes are showcased in the public space as new groups enter the centre of the village, the symbolic order of recognition may remain intact. Although some Roma from the village became rich as a result of their migration and transnational investments, this did not change to the same degree the way that other Romanian and ethnic Hungarian villagers judged them.

Scholars have thus varyingly addressed the issue of whether migration benefits development and the degree to which it leads to social change. Others have looked into economic development and decline as causes of migration. However, current migrations and transnational connectedness can rather be seen as manifestations of global transformation and incremental social change. This special issue is specifically concerned with the local expressions of these global transformations.

Transformation, Development, and Inequality

In the past decade, the migration–development debate has been firmly based on the notion of human progress towards a specific, generally positively evaluated outcome (Faist & Fauser, 2011). In this debate, the concept of development is understood according to the example of the economic growth and modern western values of today's highly industrialised countries in the global North. It is specifically conceptualised as a tool to mitigate global inequalities (Raghuram, 2009). As such, the benefits of migrants' transnationality are mainly observed from the dimension of national or local economic development and are linked to the highly valued inflow of financial remittances. To a lesser extent, the debate now also includes social remittances, in particular the transfer of political/democratic values. Yet, financial and social remittances can also increase inequalities for those included and even, or particularly, for those excluded from them.

Moreover, and in contrast to the often used notion of development, a perspective on societal transformations does not imply a predetermined, normative outcome. The transformations taking place cannot simply be considered 'democratic' processes, in the sense that people and places are affected to the same extent or in the same way. On the contrary, they need to be seen as localised phenomena that are creating global cities, deindustrialising regions and new production sites, and creating opportunities and constraints that are bound by class, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, occupation, or physical accessibility (see also Anghel, 2016). In this respect, Piper (2009) calls for the introduction of a social perspective on the migration–development nexus that addresses 'the well-being and personal security of migrants, the effects of migration on the social fabric of origin and destination countries, and the link between migration policy and social policy' (p. 96). By adding such social lens, the issue becomes not whether migration results in development, but how on-going transformations can be described at the different spatial scales. Such an approach

introduces a more critical view on the vision and notion of development as being embedded in global power relations, pointing towards asymmetrical relations and diverging agendas of states of origin and reception (Geiger & Pécoud, 2013: 372). The contributions in this special issue show that receiving localities also take in migrants and their transnational engagements on the premise of expected benefits, such as learning from migrants in city twinnings (van Ewijk, 2016). On the other hand, sending localities also have to deal with problems resulting from outmigration, concerning the children who are left behind, for example, or the depopulation and brain drain (Bennett *et al.*, 2013).

Although the effects vary considerably across places and for different social groups, the production and reproduction of social inequalities have not received attention to the same degree as the optimistic enthusiasm about the positive consequences for development. Yet, there is ample evidence that, for instance, monetary remittances often increase income inequalities. Data from a nationally representative household survey in Ghana, for example, reveal that although remittances reduced poverty for various ethno-religious groups, the degree to which this occurred depended on whether the remittances came from internal or international migrants. In addition, income disparity increased for all migrant families, especially those connected to international migrants (Adams *et al.*, 2008). Because migration is a selective process in the first place, inequalities tend to reinforce social hierarchies. And while some aspects such as income and economic capital may equalise through remittances, others, like status and recognition, may not change and ethnic hierarchies may even be reinforced (Anghel, 2016). Development engagement from migrant groups often also supports established hierarchies and traditional elites, not least because these groups are likely to predominate, in terms of both numbers and status, in those initiatives (Lampert, 2012). Hence, elite groups often gain further recognition by providing prestigious buildings for local village meetings, for example, and thereby also cement their leadership. Similarly, the often assumed transformative role of social remittances in challenging established gender hierarchies (Levitt, 1997), for instance, is not necessarily part of the agenda of transnationally active migrant women, who may rather seek public recognition and power as their communities' mothers and carers, hence

confirming more classical roles and hierarchies (Lampert, 2012: 161). From a transnational perspective, it is crucial to see that asymmetrical power relations are at play not only in the place of origin. In their Catalan study, Østergaard-Nielsen and Acebillo-Baqué (2016) observe that the migrant organisations heralded as agents of economic and social change benefiting the whole local community 'back home' have very unequal access to subsidies from Catalan institutions. Similarly, local development initiatives in immigration cities can also produce conflict within supposed 'ethnic' communities or vis-à-vis local authorities.

Debates on how to arrive at an understanding of the benefits and disadvantages of migration for the countries involved tend to be biased against the local scale. Policies that aim at mainstreaming migration into development cooperation, including diaspora engagement policies, often stem from and are implemented at the national scale (see also Vezzoli, 2010 Boccagni, 2013). This is rather surprising, as migrants tend to target a particular locality or hometown (Bada, 2016). Some authors highlight in this respect the fragmented character of the 'transnational space' bound to a limited number of interrelated localities. They argue for viewing development and change from a translocal perspective as phenomena that are shaped by spatial interconnectivity and transformed by local and extra-local forces (Zoomers & van Westen, 2011: 379; see also the contributions in this issue). Extra-local forces include global dynamics and national policies, the latter though increasingly operating within networked spaces of policymaking and implementation (ibid.). Such a relational approach enables our understanding of the relationship between transnationality, transformation, and locality.

Locality, Place, and Scale

Transnational dynamics interconnect with the transformations of place and locality that have emerged with globalisation. Locality has thereby gained in importance in relation to many issues and especially the economy. Economic competition relies strongly on cities, some of which have become global cities (Sassen, 1998), while most other localities also globalise. They compete for investments from and the locational decisions of companies and for the national state's attention

and subsidies. The new economic role of cities, and of place and locality more generally, is accompanied by political and administrative decentralisation, which has strengthened the role and partly the autonomy of local governments and thus transformed the relationship between national and subnational scales (Brenner, 1998). These fundamental changes should not be seen as resulting from a loss of control by the state and the shrinking of its capacities. They are rather a sign of the increased fragmentation of national economies and the trickling down of state policies, hence the remaking of scale. These multiscalar dynamics play out in local places.

In many policy fields, responsibilities now lie with local governments, which are increasingly joined by non-state actors from both civil society and the private sector. Local policies have become more pronounced not only in the field of the economy but also in social welfare, infrastructure development, and many other realms. Local competences have also increased in relation to a wide range of migration-related issues, including integration services and local control of migration (Varsanyi, 2010), sometimes closely connected to translocal linkages for development cooperation (Fauser, 2014). As part of these processes, local communities, actors, and governments may aim to attract or reject international migrants, either high or low skilled. Similarly, they may try to limit or encourage outmigration, attract remittances, channel investments, or concern themselves with the social problems arising from transnational dynamics (Nijenhuis, 2010). Against this background, migration scholars advocate a closer account of the interplay of scaling processes and the differential outlook these have across localities in relation to the processes of migration, local incorporation, and transnational network formation (Glick-Schiller & Çağlar, 2011). In both emigration and receiving localities, cultural diversity and transnationality are increasingly seen as offering potential for economic development (see also Çağlar, 2006). The 'marketing' of transnationality as a top-down approach is likely to involve frictions, though, as illustrated by many failed efforts of local governments. This is exemplified by the changing agenda of US-based hometown associations in rural Mexico. These hometown associations critically interrogate the role of the state in the development of their hometowns and claim an active role in local

decision-making regarding the investment of collective remittances (Bada, 2016).

Local governments, public agencies, and local communities are increasingly considered partners in development cooperation. These are now being joined by migrant groups and organisations in their role as 'transnational agents of change' (Faist, 2008). Over the past two decades, many local governments have embarked on development cooperation under the label of 'decentralised cooperation', municipal international cooperation (such as city twinnings), partnerships between particular local sectors, and other activities characterised by transnational interconnectedness. The existing transnational outlook of local institutions is in fact an important element in the degree to and ways in which localities tie in with migrants' transnational engagement, as is shown by the contributions in this issue from Østergaard-Nielsen and Acebillo-Baqué (2016) and from van Ewijk (2016). Alignment with policies at other scales constitutes another factor that shapes transnational activities initiated at the local scale. Van Ewijk (2016) points in this regard to the decisive role of financial support programmes at the national level. As such, national-level policies also structure the local response, which clearly shows the interrelatedness of the local, regional, and national scales, and the implications of these links. In a similar vein, if such national policies are poorly developed and trickle-down mechanisms are not in place, international policies on migration and development will have difficulty reaching the local level (Hofer, 2009). Some authors (Jessop, 2010; Perulli, 2013) observe a renewed power position of the national/central scale. It might be more appropriate, however, to see these changing positions as part of a more dynamic political power system coming into being.

CONCLUSION

This issue is concerned with how transnational connections and locality interplay. To this end, it offers a way to conceive of local transformation as it interacts with migrants' transnationality rather than searching for the benefits of development. In doing so, it puts transnational phenomena in a wider perspective of societal transformations. It also accounts for the localised nature of these processes rather than considering

them as playing out uniformly everywhere. Several contributions are therefore comparative and contrast several migrant groups and different localities. The articles in this issue not only consider how development and change are embedded in asymmetrical power relations across the globe but also investigate more specifically the emerging, reinforcing, and changing hierarchies and inequalities that characterise people and places.

In fact, between and within localities, in and across big cities and small rural towns, in village communities and among diverse social groups, new inequalities emerge as a result of or in interaction with transnational dynamics. We observe a diversity of inclusions and exclusions, of openings as well as social closure, and therefore new hierarchies between social groups and places. The position of places, cities, or towns, and of social and ethnic groups, and their struggle for position, in turn relates to the ways in which transnational dynamics are embraced. In the concluding article, Faist (2016) identifies several social mechanisms that underlie the processes that reproduce and shape inequalities as they are discussed in the other articles brought together here, opening a perspective for further inquiry. Thus, one important and widely understudied issue is how migrants' transnationality interacts with, is shaped by, and further transforms the hierarchies of localities and people. This is the perspective that guides the articles in this publication.

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