

Hometown Associations and Transnational Community Development

22

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Abstract

This chapter examines how Dominican migrants and their counterparts back home are able to engage in impactful community development projects across borders through their participation in hometown associations (HTAs). Employing a transnational perspective, the analysis moves away from conventional approaches in the migration and development literature that center on migrant remittances and their economic impacts, and pays closer attention to the political and social dimensions of what transnational community organizations do and how they do it. The ethnographic evidence presented advances a more nuanced understanding of transnational community development by revealing the complexities of how members in both home and migrant communities define HTA projects, and are ultimately able to accomplish them. By carefully examining cross border ventures, the chapter reveals how HTAs generate new opportunities to experiment, learn, and deliberate who gets to decide what development means and how it should be carried out in localities impacted by migration.

22.1 Introduction

According to some estimates, one in seven persons around the globe is a migrant. People are constantly on the move, primarily due to the stark disparities in opportunities for socioeconomic advancement between countries and regions. The poorest Americans, for instance, have much higher annual incomes than over half of the world's population. Hence, where one lives or can end up matters a great deal when it comes to life chances (Milanovic 2012). But moving in search of new possibilities is not only a strategy that benefits those who leave; those that stay behind can also reap certain rewards, as the mainstream literature on migration and development has pointed out. In numerous localities across the Global South, migrants have become the primary purveyors of economic assistance, primarily through the sending of financial remittances. In 2015 alone, migrant remittances sent to developing countries totaled \$431.6 billion. These vast flows have become a steady source of foreign income for national governments, outpacing official development assistance and much more stable than private capital flows (WB 2016). In countries like Haiti, Tonga and Nepal, remittances account for over 20% of the Gross Domestic Product, while in Mexico

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they have surpassed oil revenues to become the nation's primary source of foreign income (WB 2016; Estevez 2016).

For many poor families that can rely on these streams, receiving remittances means having a shot at a better life.

Nonetheless, financial transfers are only part of the story. Migrants have also contributed to the development of their countries and communities of origin by coming together and working through associations. Historical accounts highlight how “campanilist” societies founded by Italian migrants during the 19th Century, spanning from Boston to Buenos Aires, would take on the construction of bell towers, sewers and other civic projects in their hometowns. Records also indicate how Jewish *landsmanshaftn*, Chinese *hui kuan*, and Japanese *kenjinkai* would appear in numerous locations where migrants wanted to preserve and promote connections to their home communities (Moya 2005). Beyond helping establish transnational ties, these groups lent support for hometown projects and activities and created spaces for communal interaction in the diaspora by publishing newspapers and organizing diverse social gatherings. More commonly known as hometown associations (HTAs) in the academic literature, these groups have a long and rich tradition that lasts to this day.

Technological advances such as the Internet, social media, cheap telephone calls and faster air travel has allowed present-day HTAs to maintain repeated and more frequent interactions with their hometowns. Thus, these associations have been able to become more involved in addressing the needs of their origin communities. In localities within Mexico and the Dominican Republic, for example, hometown associations have been able to break long-standing patterns of state neglect by bootstrapping a series of transnational community development projects, like building roads, schools, and even opening small factories. They have made this possible, not just by sending financial contributions back home, but also by remitting development ideas and executing projects inspired by their experiences abroad. Through the execution of these transnational

projects, these associations help expand development thinking by stretching the boundaries of what is possible, generate new opportunities to experiment and learn, and also spark debates about who wields the power to decide what community development means and should look like in communities impacted by migration.

This chapter provides some insights on what HTAs do and how they do it, and describes some of the contributions they make to community development by examining the projects and histories of three associations hailing from the Baní region of the Dominican Republic. In doing so, the analysis helps shed light on overlooked aspects of HTA work in the migration and development literature, which have largely been focused on financial remittances flows.

22.2 Understanding HTAs

HTAs can be broadly defined as voluntary organizations whose members share a common place of origin and generate support—both financial and social—to carry out significant projects in host and home communities (Lamba-Nieves 2013). As such, they occupy an important place in the networks that stem from transnational migrant practices. A transnational analytical framework or perspective, as numerous scholars have argued, recognizes that migration is not a one-way process that inevitably leads to assimilation into host societies, but that migrants become simultaneously embedded in “social fields” that link multiple geographies and transcend national borders. Migrant transnationalism was initially understood and theorized as a repossess to the oppressive racial and class inequities immigrants faced in destination countries (Basch et al. 1994; Portes 1996), but subsequent scholarship has helped refine early definitions and expand its analytical reach.¹ Examining HTAs through a transnational

¹Numerous academic inquiries have also raised important critiques that have led to calls for a more precise nomenclature, and to the advent of new concepts such as “translocalism”, “binational”, and “transstate” (Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004; Barkan 2006, cited in Levitt and Nadya Jaworsky 2007). Others have disputed the seemingly

lens or “optic” (Khagram and Levitt 2007) enables us to better understand how their efforts link communities of origin and destination, and how HTA members are able to keep feet in two worlds, conserving strong ties “back home” while simultaneously attempting to become more closely integrated into the places they migrated to. It also allows us to look beyond the money and decipher the social and political impacts of migration, which are central to a more nuanced understanding of cross-border development.

Precise figures on the numbers of HTAs in existence are lacking, given the dearth of official government registries and that many such organizations are informal and short-lived. Nonetheless, some surveys provide a snapshot of migrant participation in HTAs. A study conducted by Orozco and García-Zanello (2009) amongst Caribbean and Latin American groups indicated that 38% of Paraguayans, 20% of Dominicans and 15.5% of Mexicans in the United States belong to an HTA. More recent figures captured by the Comparative Immigrant Organization Project (CIOP) on immigrant organizations in the United States indicate that 63.8% of Mexican, 3.53% of Dominican and 1.90% of Colombian organizations are HTAs. Moreover, there is a strong HTA presence in different parts of the world, including European Union countries (Caglar 2006; Christiansen 2008; Mercer et al. 2009), and in countries of the Global South (Okamura 1983; Orozco and Fedewa 2005; Lampert 2014).

The bulk of scholarship on contemporary HTAs comes from studies of Mexican and Central American associations in the US. This regional focus is due to a vast migration history, sustained flows from these countries to the US,² and media attention, but also to the existence of targeted

programs that aim to channel HTA contributions to countries of origin. In an effort to expand the national state’s influence and regulatory capacity over emigrants and their organizations, the Mexican government has pursued a series of “state-led transnationalism” projects (Goldring 2002). One of the most widely known efforts is the 3-for-1 program, which provides matching funds for qualifying projects proposed by HTAs, from local, state and federal government funding sources. The program has become a paradigmatic example of how migrants and state actors can come together to deliver development opportunities given its notable achievements: over 19,000 projects, ranging from infrastructure to health, education and other productive activities, and the participation (and creation) of thousands of migrant-led associations, have been registered since 2002 (BID 2012; CONEVAL 2013).

Evaluations and analyses of the 3-for-1 program provide a more complex picture than what can be inferred from official figures. Several studies point to positive governance outcomes stemming from the interactions between HTAs and government units at different levels. Some of these include increased transparency in the handling of community projects (Burgess 2006), the emergence of “civic spillover effects” (Fox and Bada 2008) that expand accountability and voice to the demands of residents and transnational citizens (Williams 2008) and the creation of new, civic oversight structures in municipalities that benefit from the program (Fox and Bada 2008). Similarly, analyses focused on socioeconomic outcomes paint a positive picture, highlighting how the program has been able to spur local development (Orozco and Welle 2006; Orozco and García-Zanello 2009).

However, other researchers have provided evidence of the program’s limitations. Critiques have centered on distributional concerns—as localities with large migrant flows benefit disproportionately from the program—how migrant elites bypass municipal authorities and exercise disproportionate authority over hometown locals (Burgess 2006; Bada 2014), and problems with the program’s design that introduce bias and

ubiquitous nature of transnational practices, arguing that a rather small percentage of the migrant population engages in sustained transnational practices (Guarnizo et al. 2003; Portes et al. 2002). Several scholars have also argued that cross border connections between migrants and their homelands are not a new phenomenon, but a common practice amongst earlier waves that has been dutifully documented (Foner 1997; Morawska 2004).

²The Mexico-United States corridor is the largest migration passage in the world (WB 2016).

capture by diverse interest groups (Aparicio and Mesreguer 2012; Mesreguer and Aparicio 2012).

Mexico's experience with HTAs and the 3-for-1 is by no means universal, but provides some valuable lessons. First, HTAs have become protagonist players in Mexico's efforts to link migration to development efforts. While the amounts remitted pale in comparison to the funds sent by families and individuals, their efforts have been instrumental in capturing the attention, and often the support, of policymakers, politicians and international development agencies. Thus, it should come as no surprise that El Salvador looked towards the 3-for-1 program a model for their short-lived *Unidos por la solidaridad*, or that the Philippines, Peru, Colombia and Ecuador have considered establishing similar programs (Zamora 2007).

Second, there's much more to HTAs' involvement in community development across borders than bricks, mortar and cash. When migrants get involved in helping erect a structure or start a needed service in their hometown, they're not only acting as faraway financiers, but also building political capital. Sending funds, following up on how projects evolve, and holding hometown peers and government officers accountable allows migrant HTA members to become "long distance citizens" who have a say in critical affairs within their home community (Fitzgerald 2000). This seemingly benign role can often be seen as threatening by hometown politicians who have to contend with HTA project partners that may have different political and development agendas. Partnering with state actors is a complicated feat that can lead to successful projects and policy innovations (Iskander 2010; Duquette 2011; Duquette-Rury 2016) but can also generate cross border tensions and problems (Smith 2006).

Third, because politics and social context matter, it is hard to make definitive assessment of HTAs' development capacity. Projects may reflect the desires of migrants more than the needs of hometown locals, but even these self interested ventures can have far reaching benefits. Building a baseball field or a town plaza may seem like a non-essential project in small towns

where basic needs are often hardly met. Nonetheless, the requisite transnational coordination between migrants and non migrants, the political negotiations, and the technical and managerial experience that is attained along the way, help build community development capacities and offer valuable, cross border learning opportunities. Similarly, a project that can provide lasting benefits for a broad majority, like potable water delivery system, may lead to lasting divisions between migrants and local authorities. As Smith (2006) describes in his transnational ethnography, *Mexican New York*, when HTA leaders in New York City demanded that everyone in their hometown of Ticuani pay their fair share of the cost to run a water service that migrants had substantially financed, a tense standoff ensued between residents, powerful political figures and diaspora leaders. Thus, a transnational community development effort is often more than just the sum of its parts.

Beyond the Mexican experience, what the historical and contemporary evidence points to is that although HTAs vary significantly with regards to membership, capacity, organizational structure, longevity and origin, they share a common attribute: taking on projects. It is through these undertakings that they become involved in local development efforts. But a more precise understanding of what community development means in a transnational context and how HTAs help carry it out, requires that we move beyond the standard metrics and simplified definitions that the mainstream literature focused on the migration-development nexus have offered. This requires formulating a more complex understanding of development, one that moves away from definitions anchored on standardized economic indicators and metrics. As authors like Goldring (2008) and Skeldon (2008) have argued, these approaches, primarily advanced by economists within the development industry, aim to evade the inherent tensions and contradictions that are at the center of developmental pursuits. The "de-politicization" of the concept avoids a closer inspection of the "messy politics" (Li 2007) that are at the center of these pursuits. But in order to better understand how

organizations like HTAs contribute to how development is pursued and conceived in transnational communities, we must pay closer attention to political, social and place-based dynamics. That is, the analysis must elucidate the processes through which HTAs engage in “messy” projects, where development is not a predetermined goal but a mutually constituted and contested category that is negotiated over time. This requires that we shift the emphasis from *how much* development occurs to *what kinds* of development processes emerge when HTAs become involved in transnational projects.

As the Mexican experience foreshadows, the often unpredicted and messy effects resulting from HTA projects demonstrate the contentious character of transnational community development practice. In the following section, I provide a more detailed description and analysis of different transnational projects that were undertaken by three HTAs hailing from the Baní Region of the Dominican Republic. In order to better understand the social and political dynamics that undergird HTA projects, I employ a transnational ethnographic approach (Smith 2001; Smith and Bakker 2005), that allows me to examine the complex webs of interconnection and simultaneous interaction between HTA members and chapters situated in multiple locales. The ethnographic data was collected over a 6 year period (roughly from 2008 to 2013) in three hometowns within the Dominican Republic, and in and destination enclaves established by *banilejos* in New York City and Boston. I relied on direct observation of meetings, fundraisers and other social activities, internal documents, journalistic and academic accounts, government reports, census figures and in-depth interviews. In total, 85 individuals were formally interviewed,³ and 15 core informants have provided important information and insights throughout the years.

³Unless otherwise specified, all the interviews were conducted in Spanish. All of the translations from Spanish are mine.

22.3 What HTAs Do and How They Do It: Evidence from the Dominican Republic

Different from most cases analyzed in the academic literature, where international migrants in destination communities of the Global North founded HTAs, the three associations studied were founded in the Dominican Republic during the 1970s, as a response to the state’s inattention towards the development needs of impoverished rural communities and during a period of political and economic turbulence. Initially organized by enterprising internal migrants who moved from the countryside to the capital city of Santo Domingo, and by successful hometown agriculturalists, the associations helped build and run vocational schools, health clinics and community infrastructure projects in order to take care of basic needs that were unmet by a repressive and inattentive regime. Ironically, during Joaquín Balaguer’s first twelve years in power (1966–1978)—which came at the heels of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo’s brutal dictatorship and a US military invasion—a series of youth groups and other associations began to spring up across the Dominican Republic. Some of these, like the 5-D clubs,⁴ were organized and financed by the regime with the help of the US government as a way to keep youth distracted, away from radical politics and “communist” ideals. Other collectives, like the agriculturalist associations, were outgrowths of pre capitalist rural traditions like the *convites*. An important community institution, *convites* are self-help networks where farmers come together to complete important agricultural tasks. In Baní, participants would donate a day’s work in exchange for food and the promise that others would help them with harvesting, planting or other laborious tasks. Thus, HTAs sprang up in Santo Domingo and throughout Baní following a rich and varied history of associational practices (Lamba-Nieves 2018).

⁴Dominican 5-D clubs were modeled after the American 4-H experience and were oriented towards individual advancement and the reproduction of the values and ideas sanctioned by the regime in power (Pérez and Artiles 1992).

Because many of the HTAs' early leaders were small businesses owners in the capital city or rural merchants, they could use their elite status as political cover while making claims and lobbying state authorities for the benefit of their home communities. Balaguer's regime actively persecuted, harassed and even murdered political and ideological opponents, including vocal youths who had leveraged the club tradition to establish organizations where they could express political messages against the regime using artistic and other creative expressions. Amidst this charged civic environment, HTA leaders occupied a unique position where they could access the political establishment and middling bourgeoisie, while also becoming strategic and measured brokers between the government and more vocal groups.

In the town of Villa Fundación, the leaders of the Asociación para el desarrollo de Villa Fundación [Association for the Development of Villa Fundación] or ADEFU, took on great risks to establish a reputation as an empowered and effective community organization. In 1973, they began building the town's main plaza in a plot previously designated by the community's forbearers. Employing a division of labor and management system that resembled the *convites*, they fundraised in Santo Domingo and relied on hometown volunteers to carry out the manual work. Executed without government support, they completed the highly visible project over several months. To assert their standing in the community and displeasure at the inattentiveness of the authorities, they invited the province governor to the inauguration, where the local youth poetry club recited denunciatory verses that were not well received by the politicians in attendance. Shortly after the event's conclusion, several of those involved were detained and some were beaten by the police. A couple of leaders who suffered the consequences explained that the experience helped the community gain "political prestige", and their daring attitude helped define their political stance: ADEFU would not wait for the authorities to respond to their claims, but proceed on their own. They

would also voice their displeasure publicly, and not let the state off the hook.

But most of the interactions between the state and the HTAs during the early years were not conflictual or violent. More often than not, they would involve some savvy political maneuvering. In 1977, the members of the *Movimiento para el Desarrollo de Boca Canasta* [Movement for the Development of Boca Canasta] or MODEBO, sought to build a new primary school just a couple of years after successfully starting and running a local health clinic. Given the magnitude of the project, they had to lobby the government, which at the time meant petitioning President Balaguer directly to receive his blessing. In order to do so, they brought with them high-caliber leaders from Balaguer's *Partido Reformista* whenever visiting state offices and even persuaded the province governor to speak on their behalf. But sealing the deal required additional political maneuvers. During a presidential visit to Baní, they made a direct petition to the President, who agreed to build the school after confirming that the HTA had been able to secure and purchase a suitable piece of land where the new structure would be built. Balaguer's authoritarian consent made all the difference. The day after, there was a government engineer surveying the site. Months later, Boca Canasta had a new school.

22.3.1 Becoming Transnational HTAs

Throughout the 1980s, thousands of dominicans made their way to the United States, facing a dire socioeconomic situation in the tropics: a government on the verge of bankruptcy, high costs of living, a devaluing currency, a decline in real wages, and austerity policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Moya Pons 1998; Hernández 2002). New York City had long been a key destination for Dominicans fleeing the dictatorship and the turmoil that ensued in the country following Trujillo's assassination in 1961, but by the mid 1970s other cities, like Boston, were also becoming home to a growing Dominican community.

As migration to the United States became more frequent, the HTAs from Baní saw new chapters emerge in host enclaves. As Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011) describe, migrants from Baní to the United States brought with them cultural and associational practices. Beyond the founding of new HTA affiliates, they also organized baseball and softball leagues, and would host community gatherings known as *kermesses*, where *banilejos* could connect with friends and family, strengthen social ties and keep sporting traditions alive. The 1990s would see another massive exodus, as many the economy shifted towards tourism and export industrialization, leaving many agricultural and traditional sector workers out of jobs. During that decade, 360,000 Dominicans were formally admitted to the United States, and many others entered the country without documentation (Torres-Saillant and Hernández 1998; Duany 2011).

Former youth club members and association leaders from Baní who arrived in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s sought new opportunities in a foreign and tough environment that was also rapidly deindustrializing. Thus, well-paying jobs that had been available to generations of factory workers before them were hard to come by. But because several had migrated to Santo Domingo before leaving their country, and amassed experience in the commercial sector, they were able to get by and work their way up the ladder. Once they had learned the ropes in the United States and had a chance to go back to visit their hometowns, they noticed the stark disparities between the places they now lived in and the ones they left behind.

Sending money home to help family and friends was considered a duty, one that most migrants assumed upon their arrival to the United States. And while some were also donating money for collective efforts in their towns of origin, concrete steps to organize new HTA chapters in the United States would materialize once home country leaders and international migrants understood that overseas support would further their efforts to address important needs,

and allow them to pursue bigger projects. Beyond expanding their capabilities, the inclusion of new franchises would also transform organizational dynamics and relationships with state actors in interesting ways.

During the mid 1980s, the home country leaders of the *Sociedad Progresista de Villa Sombrero* [Progressive Society of Villa Sombrero] enlisted the help of their New York City peers, several of whom had participated in the organization before migrating, to build the town's central plaza or *parque*. An important public space and distinguishing landmark in reputable towns, building the plaza would help rally transnational migrants, enhance SOPROVIS' reputation in the region and allow Villa Sombrero to catch up with their neighbors from Villa Fundación, who had built their own *parque* years before. Because the newly-minted New York City chapter included motivated merchants who could raise donations in dollars, and take advantage of a favorable exchange rate, they quickly became the project's and the association's principal financiers.

Despite a series of fits and starts in the United States, MODEBO was also able to enlist the help of their Boston chapter to carry out a major project. In the early 1990s, the HTA sought to address a growing problem with the town's water supply infrastructure, which needed to be upgraded and expanded. Once again, the HTA members understood that waiting for the state to make the first move would only worsen the situation, despite their recognition that it was a complex and costly undertaking. With the help of many Boston migrants, who organized an all day fundraiser in Boston's Jamaica Plain neighborhood, they gathered thousands of dollars for the project. These funds allowed them to begin digging a well in Boca Canasta. When Balaguer, who was back in power, was informed of the effort, he told the community to "keep its money" and promptly began building a new aqueduct. Not wanting to become upstaged by a community and an association that was capable of identifying solutions on their own, he finally delivered what the townspeople needed.

Villa Fundación's stateside chapter would emerge in 1991, following Don Isaac's⁵ visit to New York City. A renowned businessman, and de facto leader of ADEFU in the Dominican Republic, Don Isaac rounded up over 50 *fundacioneros* in a Manhattan restaurant and laid out a highly ambitious agenda for the HTA, which included two impactful projects: constructing asphalted roads and building a new aqueduct for Villa Fundación. According to those present at the gathering, mostly bodega owners and other merchants, an outpouring of cash and solidarity followed. ADEFU-New York was born, and for the next two years they would dutifully organize fundraisers to help complete the 18-km road network. International migrants would supply the cash, and following the experience of the plaza project, home country members would provide coordination support and sweat equity. Once the major stages were finished—cement sidewalks and gutters were built, ground was flattened and the aqueduct pipes were lay below the earth—ADEFU approached the Secretary of Public Works and asked them to take care of laying the asphalt. Much like Boca Canasta's experience, the government did not want to be completely bested by a community that had almost completely taken care of what are usually considered state projects. Understanding that there was a political cost to ignoring a well known effort (as numerous press outlets flocked to Villa Fundacion to report on the project), their petition was approved.

22.3.2 Navigating the Messy Politics of Transnational Community Development

Becoming transnational HTAs meant that bigger, more costly projects could be pursued. It also allowed the associations to become more visible to politicians and state authorities, who could not

afford to ignore their claims or their feats. With the support of international migrant contributions, the HTAs from Baní were able to redouble and refine a “coproduction” (Ostrom 1996) approach⁶ that had allowed them to achieve significant development opportunities. This modus operandi was eloquently summed up by Pedro R. an HTA leader from Villa Fundación:

...we are a community that's known for requiring organizing to do things. We're a community that's not waiting for the government to plan in order to do [something] for us. We plan, begin to undertake and if the government is interested, they finish [the projects] on our behalf.

Engaging with the state has meant working with different types of national and local governments, from repressive regimes to neoliberal administrations. Along the way, the HTAs have learnt to converse with those in power and sometimes persuade them. They exert positive pressure to get the politicians' attention. But this strategy, while offering opportunities for effective claims-making, can also lead to a political bargaining exercise that fosters a “semiclientelistic” (Fox 1994; Goldring 2002) relationship between powerful state actors and an influential but relatively weaker transnational civic association.

In Boca Canasta, for example, MODEBO's leaders have had to employ a shrewd political bargaining exercise where votes are promised in exchange for collective demands. Explaining how they have taken advantage of the political

⁵In order to protect the identities of the interviewees and other study participants, I have used pseudonyms. This does not apply to individuals who held public office at the time of the interviews.

⁶Coproduction refers to “a process through which inputs from individuals who are not ‘in’ the same organization are transformed into goods and services” (Ostrom 1996: 1073). The primary logic behind coproduction is that citizens and state actors have different but complementary ideas and know-how that can be appropriately brought together to generate improved opportunities for providing important public goods and services. In addition, by working together towards mutually beneficial goals, coproduction arrangements can also help generate social capital between citizens and with public agencies that can be drawn upon for future endeavors. Duquette-Rury's recent work (2016) on Mexican HTAs and the 3-for-1 program employs a “coproduction” framework to analyze migrant involvement in hometown development efforts.

process in recent years, Joaquín V., a veteran member of the hometown chapter described:

We would tell him [the candidate for mayor], behind the scenes, in a hushed way: ‘if you want to win, you have to make a big contribution to the churches and MODEBO. Now, if you want to lose in Boca Canasta, if you don’t give us anything, we’ll pay you back the same way’. We didn’t do this publicly, but when we were in closed quarters.

While this is not the preferred strategy employed by Bani’s HTAs, it is one that has helped organizations like MODEBO complete important projects and achieve gains for hometown residents. Nonetheless, it is an approach that does very little to transform the unequal and often corrupt power dynamics between the state and society in the Dominican Republic, and limits the possibilities for effectively leveraging “coproduction” to achieve gains in other domains.

On the other hand, avoiding political bargains and openly challenging the government to do its part can also lead to tense confrontations with those in power. During a public activity in Villa Sombrero to commemorate the 40-year anniversary of SOPROVIS, Giovanni Q., then President of the New York chapter remarked:

Why aren’t the authorities here? [...] we don’t have to solve governmental and social problems, there’s a mayor and a governor [for that]. We have to demand that they take care of these problems. Why does SOPROVIS have to reach into its pockets? Why don’t we unite to make demands?

A veteran member from the Santo Domingo chapter went further: “We don’t know what they’re spending the [public] funds on. The members of the municipal council have to demand that [information].” These public remarks irked the town mayor, and led to a series of tense exchanges, where the municipal chief described the stateside leaders as “newly minted pharaohs [...] [that] have no moral quality to rant against me or the institution that I lead.” Although this not uncommon quarrel can be easily reduced to small town political theater, it reveals some of the tensions and power struggles that lie at the core of the complex state-society relationships that emerge over time when cross-border civic actors become actively engaged in transnational community development. Given the lopsided balance of

power, railing against the authorities further complicated an already “messy” relationship and hindered advancement on projects and plans.

Over time, working across borders has also transformed the intra organizational dynamics and the division of labors within the HTAs (Lamba-Nieves 2018). Initially, stateside leaders played a fundamental role in ensuring that hometown projects were adequately funded, usually by organizing fundraising parties and events in the United States for the execution of projects conceived in Santo Domingo and in the hometowns. But after contributing to several successful efforts, and proving their worth and commitment to veteran leaders back home, stateside members began proposing and supporting projects that reflected their particular development values and goals. As Levitt and Lamba-Nieves explain (2011), migrant’s experience in the United States have an important effect on their perceptions of how development is defined and should be carried out. Encounters and brushes with different systems and institutions affect both their individual “outlook” and their collective pursuits.

After completing the roads and water project, ADEFU-New York’s members began to propose and support projects that reflected their development values and goals and were shaped by their experiences with “modern” installations—like the construction of a cafeteria in the high school building, refurbishing the local cemetery, and financially backing a community technology center. As Ignacio V. explained: “Modern things, like computers that we didn’t have when we were studying. We also proposed a project to build a children’s playground...we had seen similar playgrounds here [in New York].”

For the most part, projects proposed by overseas migrants have addressed important needs in home communities. In Villa Sombrero, for example, the SOPROVIS New York Chapter has championed a yearly health drive, worked closely with the local clinic, and established a condom distribution program. In a similar fashion, their counterparts in Boston started an educational scholarship program and supported projects focused on public safety.

Nonetheless, they have also proposed the construction of projects that primarily serve their

interests and desires, like sports and leisure facilities, which they can enjoy during their visits back home. In all three hometowns, migrant HTA members have fundraised and pursued these ventures. Their experience in the United States, where they are able to enjoy the use of public spaces with their families, and where organized sports leagues keep communities together and kids off the streets, fuel their desires.

Some of the projects proposed by migrant leaders create opportunities for learning about what's possible in home communities in important domains like public safety, health services and economic development. For home country leaders, their ideas sometimes seem far-fetched and grandiose, but not impossible. For Don Sergio, one of the original founders and most respected elders of SOPROVIS in Santo Domingo, the Boston's chapter proposal to build a sports complex presented an important challenge that the community was willing to meet, and a valuable learning opportunity:

Because they've resided in the United States for so long, they have some attributes of things from there. [...] it's not bad to share their ambition of having that [sports complex] in our community, that's very good. Human beings and organizations should aim to have the best. I see that as something good, I see it as normal; what's more, I see it as a challenge. ...SOPROVIS Boston has challenged the members of SOPROVIS, and SOPROVIS has accepted the challenge. That's something of value.

At times, these aspirations are not met with enthusiasm by home country leaders who understand that there are more pressing priorities, and want to exert their traditional influence over project selection. Such is the case in Boca Canasta, where hometown and migrant leaders clashed over whether to build a new cemetery or a sports complex. Following Villa Sombrero's lead, Boston's leaders understood that a public space where families could congregate and the youth could concentrate on sports activities, would allow them to better enjoy their time during their visits and contribute to a decline in delinquency and drug use, which is a growing concern in Boca Canasta. But several leaders of

the hometown chapter, and even some in Boston, saw things differently. They claimed that it was a capricious project that would only please those migrants who like to play softball during their visits back home. As Levitt has argued, the venture reflected an "ossified" perspective (Levitt 2007, 2009) where the hometown becomes a vacation destination, a place where they can escape the incessant hustle and bustle of Boston.

Hometown leaders understood that a new cemetery was the top priority, given that the old plot had filled up, partly with the remains of many migrants who wanted to be buried in their home soil. So their plan was to follow a proven formula: get organized, fundraise, buy some land ask the state for help and start building. But some of Boston's more vocal leaders were initially hesitant to follow the previous strategy. Having lived in the United States for many years, they had developed a different set of expectations of what the state should provide and how it should do so. They argued that a community cemetery is a public good, and as has been the case in some neighboring communities, the state should be the one responsible for building it. For months, leaders in the United States and the Dominican Republic failed to see eye to eye. Competing notions of who holds the power and moral authority to call the shots, and a misalignment in development priorities produced by different perspectives of what the community is and who gets to call the shots lay at the core of the disjuncture.

A solution was identified after numerous cross-border trips and meetings in Boston and Boca Canasta between hometown and migrant directors. In the end, both projects would be pursued. The Boston directors agreed to build the new cemetery in a far corner of a lot that the migrants had purchased to build the sports complex. Furthermore, leaders from Boca Canasta consented to lending a hand in the long-term completion of the stateside's proposal.

But MODEBO's case is not unique. As stateside chapters have become more embedded and committed to working for their communities, all

three study HTAs have had to travel down the bumpy and circuitous road that leads to transnational consensus. Finding an appropriate and feasible division of labors and responsibilities is central to how HTAs are able to complete complex projects while navigating the messy politics of transnational community development.

22.4 Conclusion

This chapter examines the experience of three transnational associations as a window into how community development is defined, negotiated and carried out across borders. The analysis heeds the call of critical scholars within the migration and development literature who argue in favor of a broader understanding of development. One that moves away from conventional approaches that privilege economic understandings and metrics, and pays closer attention to the “messy” political and social dimensions of what they do and how they do it (Goldring 2008; Skeldon 2008; Bakewell 2012).

A positive outlook towards the migration-development nexus has spread widely across academic and practitioner circles, thanks, in part, to a growing interest in financial remittances flows to developing countries, and the idea that migration can spur “brain circulation” instead of “brain drain”—the reduction of important human capital stocks from countries that most need them. Nevertheless, while an optimistic perspective has helped advance important programs and policies, scholars attuned to the complex migration experiences evidenced in the Global South and experts concerned with the lack of attention devoted to definitions of development have also furthered important critical assessments that refine ongoing debates.

Some of the more compelling and cogent arguments highlight how migration is both a cause and consequence of underdevelopment in poor countries thanks to neoliberal policies that have exacerbated asymmetries between North and South countries, and how a growing dependence on remittances for development have

placed an unjust pressure on the backs of migrants.⁷ Too much emphasis on the migration side of the dyad—focused mostly on who moves, what they remit, and its effects—has led to unrealistic claims regarding the potential of migrants’ efforts, oversimplified the complex interaction involved in the migration-development dynamic and eliminated discussions regarding the structural dynamics that condition development processes (Faist 2009; Wise and Covarrubias 2009). As Ronald Skeldon has argued, the mainstream debates are losing perspective, to the point that “the migration tail is beginning to wag the development dog” (2008, 5). From this limited perspective, promoting migratory streams that can yield sizeable macroeconomic profits becomes a primary motivation for migrant sending and receiving countries, at the expense of a more precise debate regarding what development means and how governments can be held accountable for helping achieve it. But engaging the development debates may prove to be a daunting challenge. As Bakewell (2012, xvii) explains,

The vast majority of studies that explicitly focus on migration and development spend little time defining ‘development’ let alone questioning its suppositions. For the most part, development is seen from a modernization perspective, concerned with progress towards universally recognized desirable goals: a common idea of the ‘good’. [...] However, if we are concerned with contested notions of development whose meaning may change both with different actors’ perspectives and over time, things become more challenging.

Moving beyond mainstream conceptions of development requires an adjustment of our analytical lenses. As the data in the chapter demonstrates, paying attention to how hometown association projects were carried out, allows us to take stock of the contesting visions and plans, document the fits and starts, and learn from the

⁷See the Cuernavaca Declaration of 2005—a statement that emerged from a workshop titled “Problems and Challenges of Migration and Development in the Americas” and was subscribed by a notable group of scholars and practitioners (http://rimd.reduaz.mx/documentos/declaration_of_cuernavaca.pdf).

experimental and sometimes unsuccessful pursuits of well meaning organizations that attempt to advance new opportunities in communities impacted by migration. In other words, careful observation of development projects reveals how these efforts are rarely straightforward ventures that follow clear and neat blueprints (Hirschman 1967).

As planners who engage in international development work can attest, official project assessments usually favor examining outcomes rather than processes. To be sure, outcomes should matter, but their definition should include a detailed accounting of the lessons and knowledge acquired on the way to a desired destination. Ignoring process, for example, might lead us to misclassify MODEBO's internal disputes over the cemetery project or SOPROVIS' heated exchanges with the town mayor as organizational failings or weaknesses. This limited approach overlooks the messy pathways that lead to the eventual completion of a project and the resolution of seemingly intractable problems along the way. It also fails to take notice of the diverse ways HTAs relate to and sometimes "coproduce" with state actors, and how cumbersome it can be to successfully negotiate development goals across borders. Rather than attempting to arrive at a definite metric that allows us to effectively measure the extent of HTA contributions, the analysis and evidence presented advances a more complex understanding of transnational community development. One that takes into account the political and social ramifications of HTAs' work and allows us to see how the completion of a town plaza, a sports complex or a cemetery can help further important discussions and spur transformations in terms of: government accountability, planning and public management, and organizational capabilities, amongst others.

22.4.1 Issues for Future Analysis and Research

The evidence also spurs a series of questions and themes that should be addressed in future rounds of research and analysis. First, given the

development potential of HTAs, what kinds of policies and programs can help bolster their work and performance? Mexico's 3-for-1 program serves as a signpost for many countries interested in linking migrant HTAs to development efforts. Nevertheless, the program's genesis and permanence has been associated with a "creative state" apparatus (at the national and local scales) that has been able to establish a series of unique engagements with its migrant population to bring about innovative development policies (Iskander 2010). But not all states are as "creative" or demonstrate such a disposition. Thus, in the absence of these policy and institutional conditions, as is the case in the Dominican Republic, HTAs move forward as best they can. This allows them to engage in diverse experimentation and problem solving strategies. Sometimes, this troubleshooting approach allows organizations to avoid the strictures of policy and program "monocropping" (Evans 2004; Portes 2010), which opens the door to novel learning opportunities. Nonetheless, experimentation can also lead to costly mistakes. Thus, devising the most appropriate policy and program frameworks that provide both systematization and allow creative organizational responses to flourish, is key.

Second, given the primarily first generation migrant member profile of stateside HTA chapters, how long will migrant support for HTAs last? Second generation involvement in HTAs and other ethnic organizations has been an on-going concern in for academics interested in understanding the longevity of migrant organizational practices and traditions (Levitt and Waters 2002; Smith 2006; Levitt 2009; Bada 2014). Amongst many of these studies, the consensus seems to be that while first generation migrants primarily populate HTAs, some second-generation children who grow up learning about community development, tend to leverage these social skills to engage in diverse forms of host country civic engagement, like professional ethnic networks or sports leagues. But this leaves us with few answers regarding the future of HTAs, especially given an increasingly restrictive migratory policies and political rhetoric that aim to curb first generation arrival into countries of the Global North. Some of the study HTAs,

like SOPROVIS-New York, have taken steps to socialize and incorporate 1.5 and second-generation youngsters into their ranks. This has forced them to begin conversing about host city community development issues, which are increasingly appealing to new recruits. Thus, it seems plausible that HTA survival in the years to come will involve a gradual shift in organizational focus towards migrant community issues.

Third, while HTA practices have become transnational, their impacts are mostly one-sided, primarily evidenced in hometown areas. Given this lopsided scenario, what can be done to channel their development capacity to also address host community issues? Levitt's assertion (2001: 128) that "transnational practices do not automatically produce transnational results" applies to the experience of the three associations studied. But this is not the case amongst numerous Mexican HTAs that have begun to mobilize around domestic political issues, or practice "civic binationality" (Fox 2005; Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010). In places like Chicago and Los Angeles, HTAs have been actively involved in rallies against anti-immigrant proposals and mobilizing in favor of advancing migrant rights. Contextual factors play an important role in defining the opportunity and support structures that migrants can take advantage of (Marquis and Battilana 2009), so practitioners and other intermediaries need to take geographically delimited factors (policies, norms, social class relations, etc.) into account as they attempt to build coalitions and build bridges with different communities of interests. Nonetheless, opportunities exist for structuring stable and possibly effective partnerships that can lead to increased civic capacity and much needed public problem solving (Briggs 2008).

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