

# **The Role of Social Remittances in Promoting Innovation and Transformative Societal Change: The case of a Honduran Diaspora Knowledge Network**

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## **Introduction**

International migration transforms societies. In this process of transformation, not only are individuals who migrated transformed as a result of social interaction and the adoption of social rules and norms in their host countries, but individuals, families and societies in origin countries are also transformed as a result of the dynamic of social connections and their spill-over effects (Nyberg Sørensen, 2004). While remittances have traditionally been measured as monetary flows and the effects of these flows in economic development widely discussed, a growing amount of literature and empirical evidence highlight the importance of non-monetary, intangible flows (Lacroix et. al., 2016; Lindley, 2009). The complex nature of human mobility poses a great challenge to measuring the impact of social remittances in innovation and societal change (Grabwoska et. al., 2017). Diasporas, and their role in transferring knowledge through diaspora knowledge networks also play a crucial role in brokering down knowledge and having an impact on societal transformation (Discua and Fromm, 2018). In the examination of literature and empirical evidence, one can observe examples of how the mobilization of diaspora knowledge networks can have a positive impact in societal transformation through fostering these networks and capitalizing on their potential to transfer knowledge and experience and thus promoting innovation (Aikins and White, 2014). The purpose of this study is to examine social remittances and their role in promoting innovation and societal change, based on the experience of a Honduran diaspora knowledge network.

## **Diaspora Knowledge Networks and their role in promoting Innovation and Societal Change**

There is a growing interest in understanding how and why diasporas promote innovation and societal change. The diaspora discourse reflects “*a sense of being part of an ongoing transnational network that includes dispersed people who retain a sense of their uniqueness and an interest in their homeland*” (Shuval, 2000, p. 44). A diaspora is perceived as an entity with common aims, interests, solidarity and cohesion, yet, in reality it is composed of diverse networks that may appear fragmented and loosely connected (Kleist, 2008). Such fragmentation is noted around the diverse modes of engagement within host societies (Sheffer, 2003). Sheffer (2003) illustrates that core members of a diaspora are intensively active in transnational diasporic affairs and enjoy a position that can appeal or leverage for mobilization of the larger diaspora. In this sense, diasporans may feel they are “here” and “there” in multiple national spaces and networks (Waldinger, 2008). Such duality is characterized by a sense of living in one place while simultaneously remembering and/or desiring and yearning for another place (Shuval, 2000).

The perspective of knowledge flows has significantly changed over the past 20 years (Agrawal, 2014; Azam et al., 2016). Whilst the previous emphasis was on geographic proximity as a determinant of knowledge flow patterns, where spatial agglomeration was central to policy debate, the role of social interaction has gained much more importance. Rather, as Agrawal (2014) poignantly states, the diaspora is perhaps the most potent force to establish social relationships between high-income and lower-income nations, its members necessarily play an important role in shaping the flow of knowledge between these regions. While diasporas are groups of migrants in host countries observing certain conduct patterns and customs of their home country (Brinkerhoff 2006), the phenomenon presented here is something more complex and at the same time smaller. Inside diaspora populations, almost imperceptible without previous due diligence, there are organized groups acting as networks, these are the so-called Diaspora Knowledge Networks (DKN) (Meyer, 2011). According to recent studies these DKNs owe their emergence to government-based initiatives and agencies. A DKN is defined as an “association of highly skilled expatriates willing to contribute to the development of their origin countries” (Meyer, 2011: 159). DKNs are believed to act as mediators between a community of skilled migrants and institutions or groups in countries of origin (Leclerc and Meyer, 2007; Meyer and Wattiaux, 2006).

DKNs tend to be rich in social capital, yet they not always strive for economic growth but rather for economic development, and thus, their ultimate goal is integrative development in their home country (Matambalya 2015; Cortez Arias 2019). DKNs are thus complex societies in which interpersonal relations are only one part of the outcome, the social capital accumulated in these “highly skilled expatriates” is necessary for them to comply with a way of pre-requisite to be part of such kind of organization, something that at the same time, plays the role of a pre-condition leading an individual to become an actor in the DKN (Bruni and Teli 2007). The social capital includes the actions of bonding, bridging and linking are present on DKNs and this is a rich explanation of their proliferation (Asian Development Bank 2006). Social capital is important and relevant due to the fact of being a way of connecting the dots of technological frontiers by finding common ground solving organizational issues (Abramovitz 1986; Gerschenkron 1979), assessing technological capabilities (Fargerberg and Jorgenson 1988), and setting innovation and knowledge spillovers (Freeman 1994). But social capital is also relevant in subjects as diverse as democracy through regional promotion in a competitive framework (Putnam 1995), social, economic, and structural transformation (Hickey 2015), and the promotion of economic development (Adelman and Morris 1965; Waeltring 2015) which is the same aim of DKNs.

DKNs rather than being mediators are vehicles of knowledge working through interdisciplinary teams, and a nexus between their host and their home countries (Meyer 2011). DKNs transmit, facilitate, and modify knowledge but also add value to it, and eventually share it with their peers and goal audience (Durkheim and Swain 2008). Such distinction has been underlined in the literature, almost becoming a school of thought shared by scholars of our time, such as Latour (2005) and Meyer (2007). In parallel to the discussion centered around the contribution of DKN to their home countries, the contribution in their host countries cannot be overlooked. In a study conducted between 1990-2000, data on labor gains in OECD countries by highly skilled migrants was systematically measured (Docquier and Marfouk, 2006). The evidence suggests that OECD countries benefit from the international mobility of skilled workers, through a net gain of 1.6 percent in skilled labor force in the 10-year time period observed.

The significance, role and channels of innovation of DKN has been widely studied (e.g., Lerner 2015; Guchteneire et al. 2006; Chaparro et al. 2004; Gamlen 2014; King et al. 2016). Individuals forming DKNs accomplish certain level of understanding they could have simply not achieved only by the social input of their home country. Such individuals acquire a bigger

understanding of the world by combining their experience, history and culture, of their home and host country, which means at least two different cultures merged in one individual. One cannot obliterate the fact that their host countries are usually developed countries with a high level of global exposure and provide wide opportunities for personal growth.

Members of DKNs tend to be naturally innovation-driven since they intend to be part of a change, using the resources and connections they have to create momentum of development, as Meyer argues; *“The evidence also demonstrates that in most cases, a significant part of the highly skilled expatriates are willing to help their country of origin”* (Meyer 2007, p. 10). The individuals inside DKNs ask the society, the team or themselves, about an actual problem, then they must come up with a solution. It would be expected that such solution goes through resources or concepts they have acquired in the social context of their host country, thus complying with the process of going to the field as expected in the inspiration state of design thinking for social innovation (Brown and Wyatt 2010) and finally they would need to conceptualize such solution and adjust it to the reality of their home country; thus by design, the DKN’s process of innovation fulfills the meaning of “mediator” coined by Latour (2005) to the end users of such innovation (Erzurumlu and Erzurumlu 2015). Such intention has been documented by Zelaya Fajardo (2017), stating that *“9 out of 10 Hondurans... want to help Honduras*. Individuals are willing to be part of a collective with a stronghold of social capital. This differs from simply coming back to the home country and being better off and instead they are willing to establish long-lasting bonds with their network back in the host country (Gamlen 2014). In this way, innovation manifests itself in DKNs through a process of problematisation, mobilisation, enrolment and interestment (e.g., Latour 1987, 2005; Meyer 2007).

In this line, Discua and Fromm (2018) show that there are core members of DKNs acting as attractors in transnational networks of highly skilled diasporas in the quest for establishing long-lasting bonds with the community in the home country. Active members aid in leveraging the ties with latent diaspora members, thus contributing to the mobilization, enrolment and interestment process. The authors found that interestment is the weak spot of the networking developed across DKNs; the expatriates express commonly a feeling of passivity among the people in the other side of the effort. It doesn’t matter how hard, actors in the diaspora try to create action, if the ones inside the national boundaries are not having the same intention and willingness of action, the results will be poor. This is a danger that developing countries face

by inherited and continuous lack of structure (e.g., Kuznetsov, 2006; Chaparro et al., 2004). Even if DKNs have the potential to drive developing countries towards becoming “knowledge economies” (Brinkerhoff 2006, p. 7), both ends of the network need to be in the same page in terms of policy and incentives. With the right incentives, DKN have the potential to act as “talent accelerators” for the young people in the host country through targeted initiatives such as mentoring, internships and training and thus trigger transformative societal change (Aikins and White, 2014).

### **Social Remittances as a Trigger of Innovation: From Unintended Consequences to Transformative Societal Change**

The study of non-monetary transfers from diaspora members to their home countries is a complex process difficult to quantify. Yet by understanding the flow of monetary remittances to the economy in the home country, an assessment of the migration dynamic can be established. Honduras presents an interesting example of how monetary and social remittances have an impact on societal change. The transformative societal change triggered by remittances merits close examination. The term social remittance refers to the “the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from host to sending country communities” (Levitt, 2001, p. 54, Levitt, 1998).

The discussion on remittances has become one of the top national issues and part of the broader policy debate in Honduras. Over the last decades and particularly after Hurricane Mitch, one of the worst natural disasters to affect Honduras, the flow of remittances to Honduras grew dramatically (World Bank, 2019). Such growth in remittance flow goes hand in hand with the rise of Honduran migration to the United States, Canada and Europe. According to the World Bank (2019), Honduras currently ranks as one of the top remittance-receiving countries in the world and the monetary flows account for close to 20% of the GDP. While estimates on monetary remittances are available and can be traced on an annual basis and the figures are carefully observed by policy makers, academics, and the media, social remittances are an understudied, but remain an important piece of the migration development premise. Their impact on sending and receiving community dynamics is not well understood. How they influence development-project outcomes, in origin or in settlement countries, is often overlooked (Levitt and Lambda-Nieves 2010)

According to Azam et. al. (2015), one can assume that the money transfer by the migrants to their family members in the home country have certain effect on poverty alleviation. Remittances are directly received by the poor people. The economic benefits of migration—such as increased incomes and stimulated domestic consumption—have defused some of the political and economic tensions left unresolved after Central America's lost decade (Reichmann, 2013). However, while remittances are an important lifeline in many developing countries, they can also foster a culture of dependency on outside flows of capital instead of prompting developing countries to create sustainable, local economies (Ratha, 2007; Amuedo-Dorantes, 2014). Thus, it becomes imperative to maximize the impact of remittance flows to promote transformative societal change at all levels, from the family units to economic activities, and social policy.

Hass (2007) addresses the importance of looking beyond income indicators in the remittance debate by examining the multifaceted ways in which migration and remittances affect communities. According to Boccagni and Decimo (2013), social remittances have a major influence on the outcomes of the economic ones, but this influence depends on the relational circuits into which it is embedded, as well as on the social value with which it is credited. Behavioural aspects, social dynamics and family ties determine which rationale is used for the distribution and destination of monetary remittances (Boccagni and Decimo, 2013).

Understanding the phenomenon of monetary and social remittances requires grasping individual aspects that are at the core of the very process of cross-border ties between migrants. Individual, psychological, and behavioural issues represent the stepping stone of an underlying motivation that drives the willingness to help and act (Discua and Fromm 2018), further ensuring the long-lasting bonds that entail optimistic migration (Gamlen, 2014).

Leaving the home country, irrespective of the reason, in and of itself constitutes a rupture with known social ties, whereby the migrant usually seeks for a less threatening and insecure environment (Torres et al. 2016). For instance, recent empirical evidence demonstrates how high is the prevalence of mental health issues in Honduran population, ranging from 60 to up to 70 per cent in an adult population in some rural regions (Mejia, et al., Martinez et al. 2018). Furthermore, the socio-economic instability after a significant natural disaster fuelled both, migration and remittances. In this respect, literature shows how migration alone is a systemic cause of psychological distress (Torres and Wallace, 2013). However, cross-border ties constitute an effective coping strategy by which the reaction to stress related to both disruptive

events, separation from home country and integration into host-country, is countered (Torres et al., 2016) — thus reflecting a striking ability to maintain a certain equilibrium through *resilience* (Bonanno, 2004), or “*the ability to rebound*”. The ability to rebound after an adverse event, and maintain a homeostatic capacity to be functional, may be achieved through multiple pathways (Bonanno, 2004; Ho et al. 2012). These pathways include hardiness- or commitment to find a meaningful purpose in life or the use of “overly positive biases” in favour of the self, as well the constant use of positive emotions to cope with adversity (Bonanno, 2004). Such pathways are featured by migration optimism (Gamlen, 2014), which drives DKN’s (e.g., Discua and Fromm 2018). In this respect, self-determination (e.g., not being overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness), and attachment (e.g., maintenance of positive relationships) are building blocks of the resilience process required to functional behaviour (Ho et al., 2012). For example, cross-border ties, such as remittances, buffers and moderates psychological distress among Latino migrants of different backgrounds in the USA (Torres et al., 2016).

In sum, to understand, how migrant networks as DKN’s may promote the transfer of knowledge required for innovation and ultimate societal change, it is crucial to consider the different drivers of change that move migrants to engage in altruistic behaviours, such as those encountered in the case of social remittances. We surmise that DKN’s ensure that economic development is at the core of their interests because of their group cohesion. Because of their cohesion, we can better understand and envision long-lasting positive effects of DKN’s.

### **The Case of Honduras Global**

To understand the role of social remittances in promoting innovation and societal change, we examine the experience of Honduras Global, a DKN that has launched projects to promote innovation and societal change. Examining what a Honduran DKN has accomplished in terms of social remittance transfer in roughly a decade might present an interesting example on which lessons can be drawn. Migration has become one of the most relevant topics in Honduras and neighboring countries in Central America. With the increasing migration of Hondurans to North America, the conversation around migration dominates media coverage and policy debate. As members of the Central American countries of the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), these countries are part of one of the most dynamic migration corridors in the world (Masferrer et. al., 2018). With the massive influx of migrants to the Mexico-United States border as of October 2018, some of the worst problems associated with illegal migration have

become predominant: unaccompanied minors, human trafficking and violence. In addition to the mass migration of low-skilled workers, highly skilled persons are increasing finding labor opportunities in Honduras, contributing to the so-called “brain-drain” of Hondurans, which accounts for over 20% of the highly-skilled workers (Brücker 2013).

According to Meyer (2011), there has been a shift in the existing emphasis on brain drain to a perspective of brain gain, where, as he argues, continuous dense connections are more relevant than the physical return of individuals. Honduras Global, a non-profit organization founded in 2010 exemplifies a shift from brain drain to brain circulation, as Grossman (2010) points out. With the birth and expansion of DKN in the 1990s, a new structured mechanism of transferring knowledge from associations of highly skilled migrants to their origin countries emerged.

This DKN emerged as a result of a small number of individuals with an ability to mobilize others. Sir Salvador Moncada, the most cited British scientist and one of the most cited scientists in the world (The Royal Society, 2018), became acquainted with the DKN experience of China and India. These countries had already worked with diasporas to further scientific development in their home countries and had collected positive experiences with DKN. The idea of structuring a DKN in the form of an association or foundation fell on fertile ground, as it coincided with efforts made at the time by the Honduran Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (COHCIT) to support the transfer of knowledge and technology as part of a larger development policy in Honduras. In 1993, the Honduran government created the Honduran Council of Science and Technology (COHCIT), with the purpose of promoting, stimulating, and strengthening scientific development and technological transfer in Honduras. At this stage the COHCIT developed a scientific and technological development program to strengthen academic research, promote business technological innovation projects, human resources training in scientific and technological fields. In the 2000s, COHCIT also promoted scholarships to support and build up human capital. Together with the Honduran National Association of Industrialists (ANDI), Sir Salvador Moncada met to devise a plan to organize a highly-skilled Honduran diaspora network. One of the critical aspects that led to a successful start of the project was the monetary support received. In 2008, the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) decided to join the initiative and procure funding. The DKN project, at its inception, was supported by private, international cooperation agency and governmental actors. The Project took the name of “*Honduras Global, Red de Conocimiento para el Desarrollo*”, or Honduras Global: Knowledge Network for Development (Seddig and Cerrato, 2014).



The DKN was created with the idea of uniting highly skilled Honduran professionals in diverse disciplines around the world. Thus, a membership system was established, where these professionals could apply to be considered for membership. Once approved as member, the individuals could propose topics or specific actions they could engage in and therefore engage in the transfer social remittances. However, a first hurdle was met in this planning phase. In 2009, the unstable political situation in the country (Ruhl, 2010) stagnated the process. One of the major changes that stalled the creation of this DKN was that COHCIT, one of the main supporting institutions, was replaced by the Ministry of Planning and External Cooperation (SEPLAN). Despite the fragile political environment, Honduras Global was officially launched on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, at the Honduran presidential palace, with a newly elected president as a witness of honour. A year later, in June 2011, twelve Honduras Global members, three Honduran institutional members (ANDI, SEPLAN, and Fundación Salvador Moncada) and a GIZ representative met in Houston, Texas (USA), to formally constitute the Honduras Global Foundation (Honduras Global, 2011).

Identifying and contacting Hondurans overseas, as well as informing external stakeholders of the activities, goals and objectives of the organisation was a priority in the first months after the foundation of Honduras Global. In October 2011 an office was opened in Tegucigalpa and the first executive director was hired to implement an initial project delivery strategy. With the help of technology, *in situ* and virtual meetings have been organized to allow the dispersed members and actors to meet, discuss and devise new projects around knowledge transfer for development. One of the first outputs was a knowledge exchange event first organized at the end of 2011, known since then as the “Academic Week”. It’s usually programmed every year around visiting trips of HG members. Other knowledge transfer events such as talks, workshops or meetings have allowed members share their experiences and acumen on selected topics to students and professionals.

In 2013, a sub-chapter of Honduras Global was created in Europe. Honduras Global Europa (HGE) was established in Belgium as a non-profit organisation (ABSL). The main objective of HGE was, in principle, the same as the foundation, with the difference that it tried to connect highly skilled Hondurans in Europe to promote knowledge transfer and stimulate innovation, scientific, technological and entrepreneurial development in Honduras. Since its creation, HGE members have participated in more than 18 scheduled events with a reach of more than 2,000 participants in Honduras. Among the topics included in events are: identifying international niche markets, digital business management and informatics, arts and culture, technology and

science in economic development, innovation development, family business development, intercultural barriers, gender issues such as violence against women and women's rights. The impact of these activities is yet to be formally reviewed through an impact assessment, but based on the literature cited above and the outreach of the events where more than 2000 persons actively participated, one can state that social remittances have been transferred in the form of new knowledge and skills which can be applied in the fields of entrepreneurship and business management, science, arts and culture and gender issues.

Until 2017, Honduras Global had a representative office in Honduras and received support from membership fees, governmental support, private and international actors. The political instability in Honduras following the 2017 elections was not without consequence. The budget for operation activities from the government was withdrawn. Consequently, the office in Tegucigalpa, which oversaw all operational activities in Honduras had to be closed. Nevertheless, core activities such as the academic week and a study tour in Europe with university participants have still taken place. Core diaspora members, with a high degree of engagement and motivation have undertaken the operational activities remotely, thus minimizing the impact of the lack of funding on the structure.

HGE has solidified the engagement between home and host countries and the diaspora. Concretely, it has contributed to strategies to promote education, culture, arts and sciences, innovation and entrepreneurship. The social remittances in the form of flows of knowledge, although difficult to quantify, have been constant since its inception and the link with cultural and educational institutions in Honduras remains strong. Although periods of fragility have been palpable due to funding, private and public facilitators in the home country continue to offer support and help in the process of capturing social remittances. How these remittances will transform into positive societal change in the long run is still to be seen. Nonetheless, the experience so far has been positive and HGE in terms of pivotal activities around social remittances involving Honduran youth.

## **Discussion**

DKN and social remittances have a great potential to transfer knowledge for the promotion of innovation and societal change in the home country. However, this knowledge transfer must be embedded in a context where institutional support facilitates the process. According to Tejada (2012), in a context in which knowledge-based economies acquire relevance, it is essential to reflect on how to optimize international cooperation and knowledge flow for the benefits of

developing countries. The case of Honduras Global demonstrates that the transnational initiatives of the scientific diasporas to have a greater possibility of being materialized in specific collaboration projects. Yet, it is necessary to be anchored on the personal motivation of the scientists and skilled professionals to be associated with organized practices and to be supported by suitable institutional backing in the host countries. Support in the host country is critical for a successful implementation of projects fostering knowledge and skill transfer in the home country (cf. Aikins and White, 2011). Bottom-up initiatives of the members of the scientific diasporas are usually fragile and they require institutional responses that support them so that they can be carried out (i.e., see also Tejada, 2012).

Furthermore, the way in which institutions in the home country support the initiatives of the DKN related to social remittances is vital for the success of any knowledge transfer effort. At its inception, Honduras Global relied on great institutional and government support. Additionally, the financial support received from the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) was vital for the establishment of the DKN. Whilst this support is important in the inception phase, a solid network of local organizations willing to capture knowledge transfer and benefit from social remittances and use the newly acquired skills or knowledge for the purpose of innovation, entrepreneurship and societal change will be a key factor in the success of the DKN.

The experience of Honduras Global exemplifies how DKN can transfer social remittances, with the aim of promoting innovation and fostering societal change. One punctual example of this transfer of social remittances which has a positive effect on societal change has been the awareness created around gender issues. According to the UNDP Human Development Report for 2018, Honduras has a Gender Inequality Index value of 0.461, ranking it 133 out of 189 countries. Addressing issues and creating awareness around gender inequality and gender violence, while promoting the empowerment of women in Honduras is paramount to ensure the development of the country. This form of societal transformation around gender inequality, fostered by the transfer of social remittances from this particular DKN is one example of the great potential of DKN in bringing about positive change.

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