



doi:10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00596.x

“Whom should we help first?” Transnational helping practices in Ecuadorian migration

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ABSTRACT

Collective remittances, in the framework of migrant transnationalism, have been recently dealt with in some empirical research, especially on the Mexican-US migration system. Far less studied is their significance in different migration flows, including their real contribution – as desirable as this may be – to local development. The article is concerned with a bottom up analysis of a migration flow where collective remittances – as the only way for emigrants to keep helping their local communities, well beyond their own families – are still in their infancy. It explores, through a translocal ethnography of Ecuadorian migration to Italy, the underlying attitudes, personal meanings and expectations – as well as the structural opportunities and constraints – accounting for helping practices at a distance. Charitable transfers to communities of origin are reconstructed as to their motivations, their main aims and beneficiaries, their embeddedness in mutual networks among immigrant co-nationals. How is it that some of them decide to help “people in need” in their own communities overseas, or in their home towns, or in both? Is this an expression of communal belonging, or a matter of social status maintenance, or something else?

Further reflections on the dilemmas inherent in transnational helping practices are then developed. Concluding remarks emphasize the relatively poor scope for such initiatives, in a recent and first-generation flow over a long distance. While co-ethnic solidarity overseas is a precondition for transnational helping practices, the latter are also affected by the developments of public policies in the countries of origin and of destination. Overall, an effective integration overseas is necessary for collective remittances to have some currency and impact.

Helping other people here?!? This is the duty of the State, they’ve been doing nothing so far –it’s not our concern! We already work so hard for our families...

W., ex-immigrant (Pasaje, 11.06)

With respect to them [*those left behind*], we are the privileged ones!
 The truly poor ones are there [*in Ecuador*], not here [*in Italy*]...
J., immigrant (Trento, 04.07)

INTRODUCTION

Collective remittances, and the wider potential for migrants' contribution to social development processes back home, have been increasingly debated in the last decade or so. Often, however, this issue is approached on an abstract and even ideological level, rather than in empirical research terms. The article explores the horizontal solidarity relationships between migrants and the motherland, within a translocal flow – connecting Southern Ecuador and Northern Italy – I have studied in depth. Along with other transnational facets of emigrant everyday lives (such as family affective ties and remittances), I have been a witness to a few informal, bottom-up solidarity initiatives addressed to compatriots in immigration or in the country of origin.

Although uncommon, such practices have wide currency in immigrants' everyday discourse, while being hardly visible from the standpoint of receiving communities. They may involve, for instance, sending money to one's hometown in order to support popular feasts, provide aid to "the poor", or finance the refurbishment of churches (or of other public spaces). More often than not, however, these initiatives stem out of connections already existing among the co-villagers in the same immigration context. As they develop mostly along strictly proximity lines – building on kinship, friendship or neighbourhood commonalities – they tend to be weaker as the social distance between senders and receivers grows, the trust declines, and the scope for direct control lessens. Though they may be regarded as collective remittances, they mostly result of fragmented and parochial social ties. Indeed, they are properly "collective" only under exceptional circumstances: when a co-villager dies, and most people in immigration feel it as a duty to contribute to its last voyage and burial back home. Hardly ever, by the way, are such practices connected with Italian charities, pro-immigrant lobbies or developmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Migrants' helping initiatives warrant, however, an in-depth analysis of the distinct meanings, attitudes and expectations underpinning them. Are they simply an expression of migrants' ongoing belonging to home, or a matter of social status maintenance? What is the relationship

between the (occasional) migrant supply and the (potentially inexhaustible) non-migrant demand? And, in immigrants' everyday life course: why, how and among whom, does the impetus to help take shape? Finally, and most importantly: how is it that some migrants decide to help "people in need" in their own communities abroad, or in the sending hometowns, or in both?

Drawing from a bi-local ethnography, I propose a bottom-up understanding of informal helping practices at a distance – including under what circumstances they emerge; how they are perceived, and sometimes supported, by migrants and non-migrants; what impingements they may have on local development processes in the country of origin. At the same time, the paper aims at making sense of the connection between pro-social behaviour in proximity relationships and in transnational ones, in a given migration flow – provided they reach a tangible scope and impact.

Before tapping into my fieldwork, some remarks are worth being made about the collective remittances debate, on the one hand; on the national case at issue here – Ecuadorian emigration, and the transnational social ties it has been fuelling – on the other. Throughout the article my focus will be on the social and community preconditions that may account, along with structural factors (such as the time spent abroad, the distance from home or the policy regulations "here" and "there"), for the development of collective remittances.

A COLLECTIVE REMITTANCE PERSPECTIVE ON A NOVEL MIGRATION FLOW: ECUADORIANS IN ITALY

Remittances are a relevant subject in its own right in migration studies, criss-crossing distinct areas of concern such as international development, South-North relationships, even global capital flows regulation. Rather than entering into the ever-growing debate on the local impact of remittances in receiving countries, I will focus on a specific type only, namely collective remittances¹. This notion has been coined to describe, with respect to Mexican and Central America migration to the United States, "a longstanding practice on the part of migrant organizations...: their fundraising and subsequent construction of various projects to benefit their communities of origin [...]. The term... describes money raised by a *group* that is used to benefit a *group* or community with which it is affiliated" (Goldring, 2004: 808).

Drawing from this perspective, I will delve into a far more recent and less “systemic” case: Ecuadorian migration to Italy. I will adapt Goldring’s notion in order to account for the reasons, ways and degrees to which a few migrants provide help – on a single, a family or a collective basis – to their communities of origin, despite their enduring physical remoteness.

Remittances are a key topic in the public discourse in Ecuador. Emigration from the country, particularly since the late nineties (Herrera, et al., 2005; Gratton, 2007), has made expatriates’ transfers increasingly important in the overall national economy (Acosta, et al., 2005; World Bank, 2007; Calero, et al., 2008). The contribution of remittances is well known, as a source of direct external financing; in reducing the vulnerability of a dollarized economy; in providing emigrants’ households with resources for daily consumptions and welfare expenses; in fuelling internal consumption; and in revitalizing some economic sectors, with their multiplier effects. Their middle-term contribution against poverty or inequality, and for local development, is however a more contentious one (Torres, 2006; Ponce, et al., 2008). To put it in a nutshell, “just as emigrants are often not the poorest citizens, so remittances do not necessarily flow to the poorest households” (Hall, 2007).

Relatively neglected in the country has been, instead, the emergence of grassroots informal transfers that may qualify as collective remittances. At stake, here, are spontaneous initiatives on a translocal basis, not relying on any communal strategy or guidance. Compared with the far more co-ordinated programmes developed elsewhere in Latin America (Orozco, 2003), they are still in their infancy. As I will argue, however, they deserve an in-depth analysis of the personal expectations and the interpersonal meanings underlying them.

My research focus was, rather than on Ecuadorian migration per se, on the helping processes I observed in the everyday lives of some 200-300 immigrants, in a local receiving context, during a one and a half year-long bi-local ethnography (cf. Marcus, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2006). From a bottom-up, actor-centred perspective (Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2006), I approached a migration flow spanning between Southern Ecuador (Pasaje, El Oro district) and Northern Italy (Trento local district) (Boccagni, 2009a). My case study involved a relatively novel migration flow – most immigrants being in Italy for less than a decade. The same applies, by the way, to the bulk of Ecuadorian migration to Western Europe (Herrera, et al., 2005). My fieldwork resulted, in the first place, in an

ethnography on immigrants' informal social events and extra-work activities (e.g., parties, leisure gatherings, sport and cultural initiatives); in the second place, in in-depth biographical interviews to 35 of them in Italy, and to 23 family members of theirs, in Ecuador.² This allowed for an insider deconstruction of solidarity dynamics, hardly visible from a majoritarian society vantage point.

My theoretical frame of reference was, at the beginning at least, a typically transnational one, aiming to analyze the extent and the consequences of migrants' interactions at a distance with the motherland (see, among others, Portes, 2003; Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004). In fact, I found poor evidence of "actually existing" transnational social ties – even less so in the public sphere, that is in a domain wider than one's family life (Boccagni, 2010).

Exploring immigrants' communal ties with their origin communities, however, has not been useless. A focus on immigrants' attitudes and relationships to their home country's public life has shed better light on the potentialities and the limitations of collective remittances. As I will show, most Ecuadorian immigrants address their motherland with an ambivalent attachment. Homesickness and patriotism coexist with disturbing reminiscences about the economic and political collapse that triggered their mass emigration in the late nineties (Jokisch and Pribilsky, 2002; Herrera, et al., 2005).

Hence the relevance of better understanding the potential for immigrants' solidarity networks with compatriots left behind. Expectations and motivations supporting transnational helping practices will be explored, along with the significant effects of a twice large distance: in space, from one's community of origin; in time, from one's earlier life.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF "SENDING FOR THOSE LEFT BEHIND": FROM THE FAMILY TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITIES?

Sending remittances to the family members left behind, at the beginning at least – or even for much longer, when it comes to transnational families – amounts to the very declared mission of one's migration. "That's what we are here for", as most Ecuadorian migrants I met systematically remark: "what else, unless for this?". Nothing else, in their self-accounts, could probably justify (and even make sense of) the sufferings, risks and losses inherent in leaving their country.

The money sent for free to one's dear ones is a necessary "glue" for social relationships at a distance, somewhat facilitating the continuous interactions between migrants and non-migrants (Guarnizo, 2003; Vertovec, 2004). Either on a micro-level, as impinging on family arrangements and structures of opportunities, or on an aggregate scale, remittances are a key factor in the social change processes fuelled by migration. If a social phenomenon may qualify as a "transnational social practice" at all (Portes, et al., 1999; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007), remittances are by far the more suitable for that label.

A matter of attachment, of status maintenance, or just of beneficence?

A few of the Ecuadorian migrants I have met, however, show some inclination to go one step further than family remittances only. Hence, the emergence of initiatives aiming to improve life conditions of their local communities of origin. To be sure, "sending home" supporting the *compaisanos* left behind is a marginal phenomenon, whose scope generally conflates with earlier social groups or institutions that migrants belonged to. However, the longer one stays here, the greater stability one attains in the social fabric and in the labour market, and relatively greater the chances that one makes a donation in the origin country, once in a while, even outside family boundaries.

What basically accounts for this is a persistent reference to one's former community – more often than to one's own country – as the standard for one's values and expectations (Sana, 2005; Snel, et al., 2006; Haller and Landolt, 2005). In practice, it is a matter of small beneficence acts generally involving, as far as I have seen, women more than men; middle-aged people more than their younger counterparts; and single migrants or family groups more than co-national (or even hometown) associations.

Indeed, the transnational solidarity acts I encountered in the field are a result of individual goodwill, more than of collective initiatives. While the latter are generally ephemeral, a few migrants may be more inclined to send their home community money (or even clothes, drugs, etc.), as a solidarity initiative of their own. In immigrants' own narratives, these gestures sound both as attempts to display their status back home, and as an appreciation of their relatively good luck, manifest in the opportunities they benefited overseas. It is somewhat a way to demonstrate their improved conditions: "newly rich" ones (with respect to those who

stayed behind), who do not repudiate their past communities, feel to belong there, but struggle to distinguish themselves in terms of opportunities, habits, consumptions and even of pro-social behaviours.

What God gave me, as I received it, I like to share it with the others – for instance at Christmas we, my wife and I, we gather everybody in the district where we live, this block, every time we have a big party for children – I like to share it, yeah, not only with those of us – if I have a little bit, I like very much to share it. It is we who want to do this, and they like it – there are those who haven't even enough for a little toy to their children, or a party for them to have a good time – so the people there, they really buck up, it's nice.

(J., 35, in Italy for 6)

I tell my daughter [in Ecuador]... well, not all the time, but every now and then – I tell her: well, I'll send you 20 or 30 dollars more... go and buy what you can and – there's one place there... a centre for orphans. They look after children there. You just go there and – when I went there, I did the same: I bought a lot of stuff, and then I left it there. [...] I know of others, they do the same... but not for an organization there! To send [money] to an organization [there], we ourselves should be organized, right here *[smiling]*...

(R., 45, in Italy for 5)

My mother and I, here – I mean, all my family here... we help a – sort of a community... every time it's Christmas, or any – I mean, when they ask us for help, we send money. Last year, for instance, we sent money for – for a children party, and even for an elderly party, on Christmas day. And my mother, when she went back two years ago, she gave them some plastic chairs – this year also she will make a lot of presents for children... she brought there a huge case, full of stuff – the stuff our neighbours, it was all worn stuff, they gave it to us, in order to – to present it right there, for those who are in need.

(K., 31, in Italy for 8)

Emigrants' money can be sent in order to support an event, to restore an important building, to allow for some public service provision; sometimes it may be a matter of sending medicines, health devices or even other basic technologies. Judging from my fieldwork, a successful integration in the receiving country, as well as the wish to display it, is also likely to be related to this primordial form of collective remittances. Recipients are local churches, civil societies institutions or informal groups, more often than public authorities. Symbolic events, whether religious or civic, are especially likely to elicit a solidarity contribution

from emigrants. This applies in particular to Christmas, to statutory holidays (e.g., a municipality's foundation anniversary), or even to more mundane events such as celebrations of mother's or father's day, of beauty queens, of music and sport events.

On the local embeddedness of transnational mutual helping

Seldom is helping one's local community in Ecuador an isolated or casual initiative. More often than not, it stems out of pre-existing solidarity practices among co-nationals, aiming to address incidental troubles of any of them. Many a time I have been witness to informal fundraising initiatives, mainly promoted by Ecuadorian women, with a view to gain resources – by means of informal catering or lotteries – for some co-national in difficulties (possibly due to a job loss, or to a serious disease). Some of these initiatives could even rely on a widespread participation, much more so when related to a bereavement here, or even in the mother country. Thus, while immigrant sociability may result both in help initiatives to fellow people here and in Ecuador, the former are a precondition for – and more frequent than – the latter. Transnational helping practices are mostly embedded in mutual horizontal ties within the local receiving context.

In terms of the patterns of interactions among co-ethnics, the notion of “bounded solidarity”³ (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993) is apt to describe the predominance of reciprocity along proximity lines, as I observed it in fieldwork. Most helping practices are indeed “bounded” within the situated interactions between family members, or co-nationals, in Italy. A “reciprocity norm... of situational giving and taking” (Engbersen, et al., 2006: 220) typically applies to interethnic solidarity among Ecuadorian immigrants.

In exceptional cases, however, the scope of their asymmetric solidarity may extend even to the country of origin. At stake, whenever transnational help on a non-family based is provided, are peculiar circumstances that exert a significant emotional impact on most immigrants and elicit their attachment to the motherland. Even then, however, trust relationships on a local scale play a significant role. A remarkable case I witnessed has to do with fund raising, when it comes to covering the repatriation expenses for a co-villager deceased in Italy.

It is here that the “myth of return” (Anwar, 1979) – even when unaccomplished during one's life – ultimately fulfils itself. Very deep-seated, judg-

ing from Ecuadorian migrants' narratives, is the tacit expectation to repose in their own land, within their own people, when their moment arrives. Generally speaking, emigrant helping initiatives are constrained by family networks, parochial belongings or personal idiosyncrasies. In such extreme circumstances, however, I have found widespread co-nationals' willingness to give support – although, arguably, an insufficient one, without some philanthropy contribution from the receiving society.

K. then tells me about their mourning for C.'s wife: after a serious disease she suddenly died, long before he could bring her back to their country. So many people, as it seems – the very Ecuadorians here, other associations, churches, even credit unions – have contributed to the high expenses necessary to fly her corpse back there. All the money they're gaining from today's *comida* selling, here in the park, they will pass it to him. [...] While I'm talking with him, an Italian woman I'd never seen appears and gives her condolences. Just before, an Ecuadorian man had come – C. didn't even remember his name – doing right the same, after which he had left a bundle of notes, 70-80 euros at least, in C.'s breast-pocket. Several other people will tell me, in the next few months, they have done quite the same. I myself will see two more initiatives at least: a little fund raising event, one night, out of a disco – just a small table and a poster with her picture and the whole story; and a sort of a raffle, one Saturday afternoon, right near the pitch where they play football all the time.

(Fieldwork notes, Val Rendena, 10.06.06)

Whether for such circumstances, or for more ordinary events (someone's proclaimed and plausible needs), the start of new initiatives is generally promoted by people perceived as reliable by co-nationals, hence capable of gaining the support of a few of them.

These initiatives may qualify as *transnational* (Boccagni, 2010), as they (i.) maintain a social link from below with the origin community and (ii.) exert a relevant, though limited influence on the latter. At the same time, they are quite local – as they require a remarkable embeddedness, and some reciprocal trust (as vulnerable as this may be), within a local expatriate collectivity abroad.

Looking for collective remittances: trust, control, and distinct expectations

Altogether, the notion of collective remittances far overestimates the facts, as far as my case study is concerned. Among the Ecuadorian

migrants I stayed with, more than one leader, or potential leaders, attempted to start informal solidarity chains, linking them back with their communities of origin. Religious groups and sport associations were a potential breeding ground for such initiatives. None of them, however, proved resilient. An example may be helpful in this respect.

M., a woman in her early thirties, keeps sending money [*to her mother*] every month. The building of their new house, just above the one-storey flat where they used to live, is almost over. She shows me some pictures that may be help me – as she tells me – in “reading up better” (although her satisfaction, mixed up with nostalgia, is manifest). Soon after that, she shows me some papers and pictures of a fund raising initiative... for refurbishing a church on the outskirts of Machala (it seems that the local bishop asked for them to do that). They raised also money for a Christmas children party, “so many things to eat, not just toys”, for “the poor children” living there. “It’s the first time we have done something like this”, as she proudly emphasizes. She has tried to get in touch with all co-nationals in Trento, many of whom – some seventy – offered money. She still has a list of them, along with the money they gave her. Some 1,000 dollars were sent there at last. She has also a copy of the news item appeared on a local Ecuadorian paper, telling about the event, with a final acknowledgement for emigrant donors. After receiving it, M. has tried to let all co-nationals have it.

She then tells me she would like to help, with some more fund raising (or maybe just selling Ecuadorian food; it should be enough), to open a nursery school in Machala. As it seems, M. and her friends would even like to make some small self-financing – in order to raise funds to charity, “not for us!”, she points out.

Her “women group”, once built, will however vanish in a few months. Whether for suspicions, envy and mistrust or just gossips, only M. – the only Ecuadorian graduate woman I’ve met so far, by the way – will keep on sending money to charity. Just a few friends or relatives contribute, now and then.

(Field work notes, Trento, 17.02.06 and ff.)

The frailty of migrant collective initiatives, as my ethnography suggests, has to do with many a factor: mutual suspicions, emerging whenever some money is to be managed, be it even in the name of a collective interest; the absence, in the local immigration context, of representative and reliable leaders, moving beyond parochial belongings and loyalties; weak communal ties among fellow countrymen abroad, although living and working in the same local area; information asymmetries and the poor scope for exerting control on the ways how emigrants’ money is

spent in Ecuador, given the distance from – and the poor communication infrastructure within – the motherland.

Far more frequent, as I have shown, are solidarity micro-initiatives – basically, money- sending – developed by a few migrants out of any larger organizational context (and with hardly an interest in promoting it). Quite absent are instead, in my local case and in the overall Ecuadorian scenario, immigrants' donations to political movements or initiatives back home, as relevant as these may be in other Latin American sending countries (e.g., Levitt, 2001; Guarnizo, et al., 2003). In mostly Ecuadorian migrants' viewpoints, *la política* is rather perceived as the main culprit for the country's troubles. Nor has, for now, the new national political scenario – where immigrants have gained public salience, and past policies have been officially blamed for “expulsing them” since the nineties (Herrera, 2008) – resulted in a significant sea change. Yet, the topic of immigrant political participation at a distance would deserve further empirical studies (Boccagni, 2007; 2009b).

Whether resulting out of individual or collective efforts, emigrants' “helping money” can be addressed to quite different initiatives: not only social and health care ones, or for public or religious infrastructures, but also for recreational or sport events, and even more for local traditional feasts.

The relevance of the leisure side of collective immigrants' initiatives (Pallares, 2005) is well recognized, as far as I could see, both “here” and “there”. Compatriots' attitudes in this respect range from sympathetic approval to harshly critical ones. While the former are far more common, the latter warrant some more remarks – not for a moral judgement, but for the light they shed on the potential for solidarity initiatives at distance.

The blame for the “bad ways” emigrants' money is spent is apparent in fieldwork extracts such as the following. Y., a woman in her early fifties, was back to Pasaje after a few years as an undocumented migrant in Italy; her children overseas were still somewhat providing for her. Her remarks reflect a fundamental scepticism about the impact of emigrants' contribution, when it comes to helping those left behind.

Sure, I mean, if those there [*co-villagers working in Trento, Italy*] got together – just those from Pasaje, and they say: here are 10.000 dollars for the Pasajeños [*non-migrants*], so many poor people, coz the really

poor ones are here – well, we'll send this money for the *reina* [community queen], so she can buy what we'll invest for: not only toys, but also clothes, or... – sometimes they [Ecuadorian non-migrants] don't have money, not even for a prescription, people die for a prescription, or for an operation costing 1.000 or 2.000 [dollars], you don't have it, and... nobody helps anybody else here [...]. There's plenty of need from people here, and no help at all for them, but if for a big feast – e.g. November 1 [anniversary of the city foundation], well, then – lots of money, yeah, on a barbecue, on a lottery and – that's the money! Only for a feast, for drinking, that's all... we should help those in need here, shouldn't we? But – nobody is helping, everybody on their own! ... everybody is selfish, there is no union, neither here nor there... (Interview to Y., Pasaje, 22.11.06)

No less skeptical is R., a teacher working in children protection programmes in Pasaje. Given the poor public resources available, he blames the lack of any significant support by his co-villagers overseas. Emigrants' own visible expenses in communal sociability, whether in the immigration context or at home, may make poor sense to those attempting to address, in a social welfare terrain, the care drain effects of massive emigration.

I know their associations have big parties there, they spend lots of money... they even elect their own *reina*... and here they just send money for their family, for their cars and houses... and helping the others – children and women here? Just no concern – they say that's up to the State, not to them... (Interview to R., Pasaje, 28.04.08)

Without entering the terrain of what should be more or less “proper”, as to the contents and impacts of collective remittances (if any), one point is clear: the existence of manifestly distinct expectations between migrants and those left behind, regardless of the commonalities in their mindsets, values and lifestyles. Especially helpful in the regard is the contribution of Peggy Levitt (2007), emphasizing, on the one hand, the interests that migrants and non-migrants may be sharing; on the other hand, the prospects for an increasing divergence of their very interests, in the middle term.⁴

Intrinsic asymmetries characterize relations between migrants and non-migrants, but there are also strong imperatives to reconcile them. In addition to their affective ties, migrants need non-migrants to care for young and old relatives who stay behind, manage their affairs, compensate them for the status decline they experience in the country they

move to, and provide them with a social safety net and a set of connections, if and when they need to return. Non-migrants need migrants for the economic support they provide and for their potential role in making others' dreams of migration come true. Over time, however, the cultural repository each group draws upon to construct gender, generation or morality changes. The national backdrop the migrant remembers is not the same as the everyday reality of non-migrants' lives. Thus, asymmetries result from temporal as well as moral disjunctures. (Levitt, 2007)

Summing up what I was able to observe, embryonic collective remittances do exist, but are quite occasional and ephemeral. What accounts for this is, on the one hand, the self-selective and minority character of charitable behaviours, much more so in a critical life context such as an immigrant one. Ordinary drives for self-affirmation – or just for achieving decent living conditions – may result in altruism initiatives being perceived as a sort of unaffordable luxury. On the other hand, a structural variable intervenes: there is limited scope to reproduce a “trust reservoir” necessary to fuel trans-community relationships, which somewhat allows to counter the lack of control on the supposed destination of “charitable money”. The same deficit of control, indeed, applies to the wider realm of family remittances back home (Brown, 2006; Carling, 2008b).

Caution is also needed with respect to institutional mediations involving charities or other agencies in facilitating immigrant money flows for a community-relevant purpose. Generally speaking, the more structured organizations intervene in the process, the higher the distrust of potential emigrant donors. Whatever the case, a communal local belonging among co-national migrants – whether in the country of origin or of destination – is not, by itself, enough for collective remittances to gain greater circulation.

MAKING SENSE OF HELPING *PAISANOS*: WHY, WHOM, HOW?

Reading through the narratives of Ecuadorian migrants and of their significant others, and drawing from ethnography, three issues warrant further remarks. The first concerns the very legitimacy, in moral terms, of immigrants' commitment to the motherland, stretching beyond their family obligations. It is not only a matter of selfish or altruistic behav-

ious, but of discovering communal grounds – if any exist – capable of justifying a personal contribution of expatriates to their earlier community's well-being. For most of them (and arguably for most people) there are no such grounds, unless in a logic of reciprocity which, however, hardly stretches beyond one's family, or one's significant others overseas.

The second point is related to the preferential recipients: provided a shift beyond a kinship or reciprocity logic is accepted (which is far from obvious), whom – that, is which Ecuadorians – should be helped first? Just fellow villagers, or any co-nationals? Anybody in urgent need (for instance as an emotional reaction to a natural disaster), or selected recipients, within a deliberate project framework? Even more crucially: should those in need “there”, or co-nationals “here”, come first? Evidence abounds, within my case study, that a proximity logic still significantly prevails over a transnational one.

A further issue involves the ways and the channels by which emigrants are actually enabled to help those left behind, with the ensuing dilemmas.

Why should we help them (and indeed: can we afford it)?

A first concern can be raised in terms of legitimacy and viability. Making sense of both issues, in the migrants' accounts, helps to explain the limited currency of collective remittances, along with the factors already emphasized.

On the one hand, migrants' perceived obligations to their communities of origin are at stake. Homesickness and nostalgia for their past lives may go hand in hand with a critical and resentful attitude to Ecuadorian institutions. The perceived inertia and widespread corruption of the latter leave little room, both in practical and in moral terms, for initiatives that would require the trust of, and mutual co-operation with, local authorities at home. A frequent objection when talking with migrants about homeland-addressed charity, is indeed the following: “This is the duty of the state... we are already struggling here, on our own”. In a sense this resonates with a theoretical argument that has recently been put forward, as to the mixed impact of migration – first of all via remittances – on human development: a positive impact “in terms of the freedoms of individuals” (i.e., for migrants and their families, insofar as they gain access to better life opportunities); and a negative one “in

terms of the common good, that is, the good of the [origin] community of which individuals are members”, insofar as it may lessen the urgency for redistributive policies, as well as greater welfare investments, in the sending countries (Deneulin, 2006: 47).

Aside from emigrants’ attitudes to public authorities in Ecuador – which may be a marginal fact, in front of their enduring attachment to their earlier community (Boccagni, 2010) – an even stronger case can be made with respect to their personal values and lifestyles. Why, after all, should they dedicate the money they gained, from their own hard work, to any communal initiative?

The same applies to the wider debate of remittance uses and “misuse”. On a macro level, certain patterns of remittance employment – apart from their expenses in basic necessities – are hardly conducive to local development. Still, there is no inherent reason why any migrant, or remittance recipient, should spend them in a different way. The whole debate on the “non-productive” use of remittances and on their employment in ostentatious consumptions, with no significant impingements for local development, misses the point.⁵

Unless a paternalist stance is taken, there is scarce ground to judge wrong a certain way of consuming remittances (including collective ones), insofar as it proves inconsistent to local development aims. The same holds true for the often invoked, but in fact very critical, transition from collective remittances into investment ones. Apart from structural conditions and personal factors that may discourage emigrants’ investments, the fact remains that collective remittance, generally speaking, build on a quite different logic from profit-oriented investments (Hall, 2007).

While the transition from community to productive remittances is problematic, by no means easier is a conversion of family remittances into community donations. A key distinction between non-profit and profit-oriented aims applies in the first case, and between private and public goods, in the second case. As to the latter, a private good need not automatically translate into a public good (and even less so in a common one, as Deneulin (2006) puts it); nor should it be forced to. A much more favourable terrain for enabling a greater convergence of private and public interests (e.g., in terms of banking, of counselling on savings and investments, of reliable and effective opportunities for helping at a distance) should rather be built.

A matter of one's life conditions, compared to the receiving society's standard, is also at stake here. In so far as an immigrant does live in deprivation (or perceives one's living conditions as such), hardly can home attachments, or reputation and status maintenance issues, be enough for spurring "charity at a distance". Conditions of relatively good integration abroad are likely predictive, even in this respect, of a greater orientation to transnational social practices (Portes, 2003; Guarnizo, et al., 2003).

G., who's been here for seven years, keeps telling me that "those who came later" can't even see "how much we", the pioneers, "ran our ass off" for being accepted here. [...] Now and then he has a look, somewhat paternalistic, at the other guys there, out of the football field, drinking and listening to loud music. G does like to distinguish himself from "them". But he also likes to tell me, pointing at M. who is sitting nearby, that "some of us have started to collect money, in order to help those living there. It was extraordinary!". Most immigrants, however "just think" – as he puts it –: "We are already poor ourselves... why on earth should we help people there?!".

(Fieldwork notes, Trento, 27.05.06)

Whom should we help first?

A further issue has to do with the preferential recipients of migrants' help, provided this exceeds the family domain. Once again, when it comes to self-committing for country fellowmen, proximity orientations seem to matter more than translocal ones.

Most Ecuadorian immigrants I met have been in Italy for five to ten years at most: quite short as a span, not to mention their peripheral settlement with respect to Ecuadorian "colonies" in Genoa or Milan, for proper hometown associations to develop (cf. Orozco, 2003; Goldring, 2004; see also, in a more critical perspective, Waldinger, et al., 2008). While spontaneous associations of theirs do emerge (and vanish) frequently, building on shared patriotic symbols and belonging, they are quite localistic in their scope and orientation.

Whether concerned with leisure and sport activities or, sometimes, with advocacy and solidarity ones, such initiatives are basically mutuality-oriented. They aim to satisfy common demands or needs, emerging in immigrant every day life. Though not necessarily preventing a transnational orientation, this mutualistic approach reflects communal needs "here" perceived as far more urgent than any charitable initiatives "there".

This is the third attempt at least – within a year or so – to found an “association” involving the Ecuadorians in Trento. The initiative is led by R., married to an Italian, living here for decades. At the start meeting, while she talks of “representing Ecuador” or of “making solidarity” with their own country, the others keep silent. They don’t look very persuaded. Apparently, they would rather expect to be able to claim more rights or opportunities here; for instance, an easier access to home loans, or to banking operations, as H. pragmatically puts it. “Solidarity” is not the real issue here. Nor is Ecuador, after all. At most, the association should deal with some Christmas initiative, involving entertainment and presents for their children, here.

(Field notes, Trento, 27.04.06)

At the second meeting of the new association “board”, P., as frank as usual, summons up what most of them must be thinking: “We’d better help first those of us who are here! And then, the rest...”

(Field notes, Trento, 02.06.06)

Another association, another annual meeting, the same mess as usual. When it’s her time to take up the word, J. has always her point: “Why, instead of buying Christmas gifts for our children, or of raising money for leisure trips here, don’t we get organized to help poor people there? With respect to them, all of us here – we are pretty well! We would just need someone trustable there – people we can rely upon...”. What a nice idea would that be, someone says. Most of them, however, show no real concern. The meeting will soon proceed to a different topic.

(Fieldwork notes, Pinzolo, 08.04.07)

The overall collective remittance discourse, in my case study, exceeds by far empirical evidence. The same actually applies to the sociocultural transnationalism thesis, claiming a growing “participation in immigrant organization, that promote cultural or social ties with the country of origin” (Itzigsohn and Saucedo, 2002). The poor scope for collective remittances, in other words, is only a facet of a generally low transnational participation (Boccagni, 2010).

How can we help them?

Whatever the nostalgia or the attachment to one’s origin community, there is basically one way only, for an expatriate in a large-distance migration flow, to help there: sending money. I have found neither scope or opportunities, nor professional skills for a more qualified “service provision” – be it counselling, development projects, enterprise start-up,

etc. – to be implemented by emigrants in favour of their own origin communities. “The only thing you can do to make *them* feel you still do belong”, as many of my interviewees would put it, “is *sending money*”. That is, after all, what a “grateful migrant” is expected, or even pleaded with, to do.

The fact remains that sending back money, even more so in collective terms, is typically a matter for suspicions and difficult control, whatever the charitable aim at stake. Nor is it a terrain, for the Ecuadorians in Italy at least, for co-operation between immigrant initiatives, autochthonous NGOs, and mother-country institutions abroad (especially consulates). With respect to the potential role of the latter, the distance from expatriates’ bottom-up initiatives remains a huge one. Even this gap makes unlikely grassroots immigrant initiatives to turn into more complex, and possible effective, transnational helping practices.

Just one year after, those of the association ... (one of the three or four of Ecuadorian immigrants here) have succeeded in inviting the Consul again. A valuable opportunity for visibility – so many local authorities being there (even though the very Ecuadorians are pretty few). On the Consulate website, a few weeks earlier, a message in Italian had appeared, asking any potential donor for a money contribution, due to the serious floods in the mother country. A bank account, that’s all.

For this meeting, association members have prepared a short video on different Ecuadorian cities and natural areas. Cries at every new picture, a long applause when it comes to Pasaje, their own town. After that, a short speech of J. is scheduled. In the last months, she must have mustered up a few co-nationals to realize a solidarity initiative for “the truly poor ones” at home. With the money they’ve saved together here, and with the mediation of “a trustworthy one” in Pasaje, they’ve bought a couple of wheelchairs for two disabled persons. She shows a picture of the two of them. “Can you see? Our money arrived right there...” – no place for expedencies. Quite perking up (although the others there don’t seem so enthusiastic), she addresses the Consul: why couldn’t we send a big package from here? Couldn’t you help us in that? The Ecuadorian dignitary smiles and shakes her head. No way. “It would take too long, it would be too expensive and not really useful... it wouldn’t really make sense”. The only thing you can do, she states again, is sending money. And here we are back to their distrust and suspicions.

(*Fieldwork notes, Tione di Trento, 19.04.08*)

CONCLUSIONS

By studying Ecuadorian migrants' transnational relationships, and through their own accounts, I have gained some hints on the potential scope for remittances on a community basis: in a terrain where strict affective ties and moral obligations, inherent in family transfers, do not apply. Diverse motivations and expectations are involved here: reciprocity, properly solidarity and even status maintenance ones. More "entrepreneurial" driving factors – including the expectation to influence, via collective remittances, political life at home – are not as relevant, for the time being, to a novel migration flow such as the Ecuadorian one to Italy.

The paucity of collective remittances is also related to the remoteness from the motherland, which makes it difficult for migrants to keep real track of any solidarity initiative. Despite their loyalties and attachment to the communities of origin, and regardless of the potential inherent in real time communication via information and communication technology, distance still matters. All other things being equal, a large geographical and physical distance is likely to lessen the interpersonal trust and even the perceived urgency to help somebody being a co-national, but not a family member.

Secondly, as my case suggests, a commonality in migrants' place of origin is likely to result in a peculiar "contextual expertise" with respect to the community left behind. However, it does not necessarily facilitate co-development initiatives. Emigrants have no inherent duty to take charge of them, aside from the fact that their attitudes to the motherland institutions may be detached or overtly hostile.

The peculiar value of collective remittances has rather to do with their spontaneous, self-fuelling development, as a social capital and reputational resource capable of refining co-operation interventions, though by no means fungible with them. As a resource, it can be facilitated – but not built from the top down – by public authorities in both sending and receiving countries. Generally speaking, public policies can play an important role with respect to the capacity building of immigrant associations or coalitions, as well as in the empowerment of their accountability, transparency and scope for transnational action. The significance of immigrant collective initiatives to community development purposes is based on their local knowledge and acquaintances, and the legitimacy they can provide public initiatives with. Nevertheless, their effective involvement should not be taken for granted.

To be sure, countries of origin have been showing a significant interest, on an almost worldwide scale, in tapping their expatriates' contribution for development purposes (see, among others, Ionescu, 2006; De Haas, 2007). Among the state-led development programmes which build also on collective remittances, a mention could be made of the "Three for One" initiative in Mexico, whereby governmental investments are matched with donations of hometown associations, with a view to support public interest projects (Goldring, 2004: 825); or of the LINKA-PIL programme, aiming to channel assistance from emigrants in the Philippines (Chander, 2006: 64). Whether similar "policies of reaching out to engage the diaspora" (Gamlén, 2008: 841) can be developed in Ecuador, in the face of a far less structured migration flow, is for now contentious. While Ecuadorian emigrant policies have traditionally been weak, the novel construction of emigration as a significant public issue – resulting, after 2006 presidential elections, in the institution of a dedicated State Ministry⁶ – may, however, pave the way for further developments.

The challenge ahead is to help migrant initiatives to move beyond parochialism, short-termism and isolation from the host society. Grounding their leaderships both in democratic representation, and in the development of a significant know-how, is often a difficult issue to cope with. Although conditional on endogenous dynamics, the process could be significantly stimulated (e.g., via targeted training and counselling, bottom-up consultation, support to communication at a distance between migrants and non-migrants) by local and translocal co-operation policies, involving both local authorities and NGOs.

What can also be drawn from my ethnography, casting further doubts on strictly transnational interpretations, is a systematic pre-eminence of communal initiatives in the immigration context, over would-be transnational ones. The scope for communitarian co-operation between co-nationals in the same immigration context – as piecemeal as it may be – is however far greater than their organized co-operation with those left behind in Ecuador.

Once again, in empirical terms, the relevance of proximity relations among immigrants, in the public sphere at least, proves much higher than the relevance of actually transnational relationships. Transnationalism has arguably superseded, by now, most other approaches in the academic discourse. Nevertheless it turns out to be less relevant, in the realm of everyday immigrant life and of properly empirical research,

than many authors would contend. The key distinction, here, is not transnationalism versus assimilation, which indeed is a matter of complementarity, as most scholars now recognize (e.g., Levitt and Glick-Schiller, 2004). A more meaningful distinction should rather be made, on analytical grounds, between social action in proximity, and at a distance (Urry, 2002). In a recent and poorly structured migration flow, such as the one I studied, the former is still much stronger and pervasive than the latter.

Embeddedness in co-national mutual sociability seems, thus, a recurrent qualification for helping relationships at a distance – even accidental or symbolic ones – to develop within migrant communities. The scope for collective remittances, in immigrants' expectations and social practices, can hardly be grasped unless their integration overseas is also taken into account, as a precondition for transnational helping practices.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An earlier draft of the article was discussed at an IMISCOE conference on Migrant Diasporas and Decentralized Development, Rotterdam, May 2008. My thanks go to R. Black and G. Engbersen for their helpful comments.

NOTES

1. In the author's typology, collective remittances stand in an intermediate position between family transfers – applying to the bulk of emigrant remittances, covering the basic costs of everyday social reproduction – and, maybe even less common, productive/entrepreneurial remittances, resulting in successful emigrants' investment in any profit-making activity, developing in the countries of origin (Goldring, 1994; Hall, 2007).
2. The empirical study was related to my PhD fieldwork (Boccagni, 2009a) and to an exploratory study I conducted in Ecuador, within a comparative research on the impact of emigration on the welfare systems in the countries of origin (CeSPI, 2009). My choice of the interviewees was a "context-specific" one, driven by a logic of "theoretical sampling" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Even so, it reflected the greater proportion of women (at about 62%) than men, and of relatively young individuals (the majority of them less than 40 years old), among Ecuadorian immigrants in Italy (cf. ISTAT, 2008).

3. The notion of “bounded solidarity” sheds light on the potential, as well as on the limitations, inherent in the spontaneous solidarity which may emerge among co-ethnics in a local context of settlement. As Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993: 1324-5) put it, bounded solidarity is “a source of social capital [which] does not rise out of the introjection of established values or from individual reciprocity exchanges, but out of the situational reaction of a class of people faced with common adversities. If sufficiently strong, this emergent sentiment will lead to the observance of norms of mutual support, appropriable by individuals as a resource in their own pursuits”. No less important is that bounded solidarity, in the first place, “is limited to members of a particular group who find themselves affected by common events in a particular time and place” (ibid: 1327); and that, in the second place, “it is strongest... when it brings about the construction of an alternative definition of the situation, based on re-enactment of past practices and a common cultural memory (ibid.: 1331-2).
4. See also Carling (2008a), for an analytical framework of the asymmetries underlying the transnational social life between migrants and non-migrants.
5. I owe Alicia Torres for a fruitful conversation on this (Quito, personal communication, 03.05.08).
6. The Secretaría Nacional del Migrante (SENAMI) has the mission to promote, “inside and outside the Country”, “migrants’ care, protection and development” (cf. Boccagni, 2008). This is expected to result also in significant synergies with migrant associations. Still, no obvious overlapping exists between the interests and expectations of state agencies and of grassroots migrant initiatives. And, as of now, no evidence has been provided of a significant involvement of migrant associations in social development programmes back in Ecuador, aside from a few pilot projects. For a review of the past co-development initiatives in the country, basically related to decentralized co-operation with Spain, see Cortés and Torres (2009).

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