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Transnationalism:

What It Means to Local Communities

by Alvaro Lima, Boston Redevelopment Authority

Much has been written about transnational immigrants—people who move to a new country but keep strong economic, social, and political connections with their countries of origin. Not enough has been understood, however, about transnationals' contribution to their local communities.

Some migration scholars have explained how easier and cheaper air travel, better telephone access, personal computers, and other communication innovations have enabled sustained interpersonal contacts between immigrants and the people in their homelands, increasing transnationalism. Others have focused their studies on the importance of remittance flows—\$300 billion sent to home countries annually. Sociologists, for their part, have explored social remittances, or the ways that ideas, customs, social norms, and consumption

patterns learned in the new environment are transmitted to the folks back home. Political scientists, in turn, have focused on the influence of transnational immigrants when elections are held in their cities and villages of origin.¹

But what is the economic, social, and political impact of these immigrants on their host communities and how does it differ from that of “traditional” immigrants?

Unfortunately, a persistent perception among many scholars is that transnational

ties are antithetical to immigrant incorporation in new nations. This perception is strong even among researchers and activists who believe the contributions of immigrants are net positive to their host communities.² Abundant data and research, including research by this author, show that transnational immigrants actually tend to be more integrated than traditional immigrants and do better for themselves, while contributing more to their host communities.

Research that I conducted in 2008 among Brazilian immigrant entrepreneurs in Boston shows that entrepreneurs in particular are more likely than the general Brazilian immigrant population to have ties with their home country, obtain U.S. citizenship, participate in U.S. elections, and contribute economically to the United States.³

These transnational entrepreneurs maintain close business, civic, and social relationships with host communities and their communities of origin in Brazil. They live intense transnational lives. Although overall only 10 percent of Brazilian immigrants travel to Brazil once or more every year, 53 percent of Brazilian entrepreneurs visit Brazil that often. Thirty-seven percent stay for a month or more, compared with about 7 percent for the general population.

Brazilian entrepreneurs also maintain contact by phone or e-mail. Sixty-nine percent call home two or more times a week (versus about 61 percent for the Brazilian population in Boston); 17 percent call once a week (versus 17 percent for the Brazilian population). Eighty-three percent of Brazilian entrepreneurs use e-mail, compared

Brazilians in Boston. Eighty-six percent contribute to their retirement accounts in Brazil (versus 15 percent of the general Brazilian immigrant population in Boston). Twenty-nine percent of them pay for student loans in their home country, compared with roughly 6 percent of the Brazilian immigrants in

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with 72 percent for the Brazilian immigrant population overall. They are slightly less tuned to radio and TV broadcasts from Brazil. About 81 percent listen or watch such broadcasts, compared with 88 percent of Brazilians in Boston overall.

Fifty-eight percent of Brazilian immigrant entrepreneurs provide help other than remittances to their families in Brazil, compared with 37 percent for

Boston. And they maintain other economic activity in Brazil, financing properties (14 percent), capitalizing micro-enterprises (11 percent), and lending money to their families there (25 percent).

Possibly because of their civic engagement in Brazil, they also are more engaged in the civic life of Boston than the

The author in his U.S. office and back in his home country, Brazil.



majority of the local Brazilian immigrants. Thirty-three percent are involved in some form of philanthropic endeavor, compared with about 12 percent for Brazilians in Boston. They also contribute financially to charities in larger proportions (38 percent compared with about 11 percent for the overall Brazilian community in Boston). Their greater civic engagement is expressed at the political level, too. Whereas only 24 percent of Brazilians vote in Brazilian elections, 56 percent of Brazilian entrepreneurs do so. Those who vote in Brazilian elections tend to have greater political participation in Boston's political process.

My ongoing research on transnationalism and integration using a sample of Dominican immigrants from New York points to the mutually reinforcing process in which ties to the home country actually improve ties to the host country. For example, among New York Dominican immigrants, 86 percent of those with higher degrees of transnational activity have annual incomes greater than \$35,000,

whereas none of those with lower degrees of transnational activities earn as much as \$35,000. For the host community, the higher incomes produce numerous direct and indirect benefits, including increased local productivity and more tax revenue.

The group with a higher degree of transnationalism has a greater proportion of children born in the United States but a smaller household size (2.5 persons against 4.25 in the group with a lower degree of transnationalism). The group also has been in the country longer (about 34 years against 17 years). Fifty percent of the group own their homes and pay local property taxes, whereas the Dominicans with a lower degree of transnationalism do not. Eighty percent of the immigrants in the higher transnational group have become American citizens; only about 63 percent of those in the lower transnational group have American citizenship.

The financial profiles of the groups also diverge: the higher transnational group has average annual savings of more than four times the average of the lower transnational group (\$17,500 compared with \$3,750) and is more likely to use U.S. banks. Only immigrants in the higher transnational group have certificates of deposit held in U.S. banks. Moreover, 57 percent of that group has investments in the United States; only 13 percent of the

lower transnational group does. Differences in the number of financial obligations the two groups have in the United States—credit card loans, home mortgages, and the like—follow a similar pattern.

Civic participation profiles of the two Dominican groups go against the expectations of observers who emphasize assimilation. The group with a higher degree of transnationalism has a greater proportion of members who vote in U.S. elections (86 percent, compared with 63 percent for the lower transnational group), are members of U.S. political parties, and report that they write letters to Congress (71 percent compared with 50 percent). Additionally, on a self-rating scale, the higher transnational group were more likely to express the belief that they belong to the United States than the lower transnational group.

Most migration has a positive impact on communities in both the sending and host countries and on the migrants themselves. Transnational migration is especially desirable in that it expands the benefits of migration exponentially.

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Endnotes

¹ The term "social remittances" was coined by Wellesley College Professor Peggy Levitt in her book *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley: University of California Press; 2001).

² A 1997 study on the economic, demographic, and fiscal effects of immigration by the National Research Council (NRC) concluded that "immigration produces net economic gains for domestic residents." See *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1997), p. 3. NRC estimates that the immigration-related domestic gain "may run on the order of \$1 billion to \$10 billion a year."

³ My methodology involves a scale relating the degree of transborder activity to transnationalism. The scale shows high levels of such activity at one end and low levels at the other.

