

## Book Reviews |

**The Remittance Landscape: Spaces of Migration in Rural Mexico and Urban USA** by Sarah Lynn Lopez, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015, pp. 336, ISBN: 978-022620281-5.

In this intriguing book, Lopez urges us to rethink migration, remittances and space with a focus on Mexicans. She has based her discussion on an extensive research investigating investments in buildings (or dream houses) by migrants and followed their tracks to rural Mexico. Like in many other migrant source countries, Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco, Greece and elsewhere, migrants invest in building houses in their towns and villages of origin. These houses common in both rural and urban landscapes of all migrant sending countries. Lopez examines what she calls "the remittance landscape". In line with our work with Jeff Cohen<sup>1</sup>, Lopez's approach in a way links movers and non-movers over the space they create together.

Remittances-led architecture created in the areas of origin is a new and understudied area. Hence Lopez's intervention is important. Her fieldwork was based in rural Jalisco where she looked into not individual houses but the whole landscape including the public projects. The more interesting angle here is something perhaps we may call "architectural remittances" as Lopez tries to see any parallels between what migrants build in their destination countries and what they build back in the country of origin.

It is common migrants copying, creating replicas of certain monuments in those remittance houses built back in their home towns and villages. Lopez offers examples to that effect such as the Statue of Liberty replica in Antonio's house. The study can be seen more of an aesthetic impact of remittances and migration as it stays away from sociological perspective. It is important to understand aspirations of movers and non-movers and these are according to Lopez expressed in these built -remittance- spaces of rural Mexico.

There are multiple negotiations involved in the process. On the one hand, migrants express a promise of return and contribute to the local community they once left behind. On the other hand, they build for their own identity and belonging is part of these projects. And yet, identities projected through these practices are a reflection of transnationalism, being neither there nor here as movers bring in values, meanings and materials from both the US and Mexico.

Development from below is a hard sell and Mexican government's attempts seem not succeeding in this regard. Lopez also looks into temporality. How

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<sup>1</sup> See Cohen, J. H. and Sirkeci, I. *Cultures of Migration*, University of Texas Press (2011).



aspirations change over time. Conflicts find their way into these building projects; between movers and non-movers, along with state intervention. The differences between building visions and local realities and regulations are part and parcel of these conflicts. We also see that remittance-funded building projects drive local tensions and conflicts. These tensions may have a transformative effect at local level. Perhaps Lopez could have emphasised some nuances over gender and other groups involved in these negotiations.

Lopez is also gazing into class relations and arguing that migration and remittances are changing the structure or pattern here. Perhaps more historic rethinking is needed here. The reversal of migration flows between the US and Mexico along with increased difficulty and risks in crossing the borders need to be taken on board too.

Lopez's book is an important addition to the literature in several ways. First it offers a good view of the ways in which movers remit and how these remittances are used back in the town of origin. Secondly, transfer of not only money but ideas and visions are reiterating for our understanding of transnationalism. Thirdly, Lopez's work urges us to see remittances in an embedded fashion as remitting practices interact with multiple other processes. Finally, it is important to see a significant change in building landscape as a result of remittances. This will definitely be of help to those who want to understand transnational processes in play when it comes to remittances and their impact on communities, households and the landscape left behind. A very well written and insightful piece of work for our libraries.

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**Migrant Remittances in South Asia: An Introduction** edited by Md Mizanur Rahman, Tan Tai Yong, A K M Ahsan Ullah, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014, pp. 302, ISBN: 978-1-137-35079-4.

Rahman, Yong and Ullah, three competent experts in migration in South Asia aimed at offering a set of theoretical treatments of remittances and the ways in which their potential for fostering development potential comes into reality. 15 authors bring us a comprehensive account of how remittances are sent, received and used in the context of development process in South Asia.

While we are very busy with the "migration crises" in Europe and North America, this volume brings out attention one of the other "crises", that of South Asia. However, a focus on remittance is important to get the balance right about migration "crises" since remittances are perceived to be a very beneficial private transaction in terms of development goals in an increasingly global economy. This particular region, authors present accounts for about one fourth of the global flows and the volume of these amounts is no less than about ten percent of the region's gross domestic product (GDP).



Rahman and colleagues confirm that, as we have argued in our World Bank survey in 2009-2012, despite a volume decline in various regions and corridors, remittances received in South Asia remained resilient.<sup>2</sup>

Rahman and 14 colleagues tackle with remittances and money transfer mechanisms and development implications of remittances as well as attempting a theoretical treatment of the issues. In the opening chapters, authors underline the importance of looking into the detail and they urge researchers to look at narratives around remittances and fill the gaps left by the macro level treatment of the issue which is very common among economists and strategists. Authors criticism leads to the importance of community perspectives but perhaps they should place more emphasis on household perspectives too.<sup>3</sup> The distinction between regular and irregular movers and transfers also come into discussion here.<sup>4</sup>

The book refers to South Asia as a region and offers closer look into two key recipient countries India and Nepal. India is the largest recipient in the region whereas for Nepal remittances represent a significant chunk of the country's GDP. In a wider survey, other important players in the regions could have been specially treated such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.<sup>5</sup>

Some contributions in the book are very interesting and make one wonder what else are we missing in the migration literature and when we think of movers around the world. Ullah and colleagues' chapter on money transfers after a migrant is deceased is one such interesting read. Similarly, Migdal and colleagues' work linking remittances and fertility offers new insights and thinking about new causalities which may or may not be spurious.

This is a valuable contribution to the remittances literature for two reasons: first, it offers a good comprehensive outline of remittances in this region; second, it offers insights for future research and force us to think about theories and models we use to discuss and treat remittances.

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<sup>2</sup> See Sirkeci, I., Cohen, J. H., & Ratha, D. (Eds.). (2012). *Migration and remittances during the global financial crisis and beyond*. Washington, DC: World Bank Publications.

<sup>3</sup> See Cohen, J. and Sirkeci, I. (2011). *Cultures of Migration: Global nature of contemporary human mobility*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

<sup>4</sup> A such qualitative treatment of irregular and regular transfers can be seen in Sirkeci, I. et al. (2016). *Little Turkey in Great Britain*. London: Transnational Press London.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, in a later volume, one of the editors offer these country case studies too; see: Md Mizanur Rahman and Zaara Zain Hussain (2015). *South Asian Migration: Remittances and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.