

## Editorial: Advancing Scholarship on Remittances | Jeffrey H. Cohen<sup>ø</sup>

The articles included in this issue of *Remittance Review* reinforce our continued efforts in maturation of theory in the study of remittance practices (see Sirkeci, Cohen, Ratha, 2012 and Ratha and Sirkeci, 2010). The themes addressed go well beyond concerns with the physical nature of remittances, direction of flows and outcomes of remittance practices in an economic vacuum. In fact, the authors whose articles are included here, work from the belief that remittances are best understood within a political economy framework that emphasizes global market forces, pays careful attention to how remittances are embedded in culture and society, and recognizes how remittances as well as migration influence, and are influenced by, kinship.

Vusilizwe Thebe and Sara Mutyatyu set the tone for this volume with their discussion of *omalayisha*, the informal, communal social ties that are grounded in friendship, neighbourhood and kinship, and moving goods between South Africa and Zimbabwe (and see Crush, 2015:5). They recognize that remittance flows are central to a household's economic survival as well as its cultural value and social meaning. Built on socially sanctioned relationships, the authors illustrate the dynamic nature of flows that follow *omalayisha*; how those flows parallel formal banking ties; and most importantly given the chaotic nature of economic life in Zimbabwe, how remittances are protected and used to support economic accumulation by migrant families at points of origin in the countryside. More than

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simply living from day-to-day, the *omalayisha* relationships described support Zimbabweans as they bridge the distance between sending and destination communities, adapt to the impact of reforms, market globalization and rural marginalization.

Ayman Zohry defines a similar thread in his discussion of non-monetary remittances in Egypt. His discussion clarifies how non-monetary remittances facilitate a household's survival even as they support far reaching changes. For Egyptian movers, non-monetary remittances include the ideas and behaviors that transfer from destination communities to sending homes and that can foster critical views that effectively reshape behaviors, the meaning of community and the expectations that movers have for non-movers, the children of movers and broader societal practices and beliefs. Zohry's findings are important for at least two reasons. First, it is easy to miss the far reaching effect non-monetary remittances play when we focus on the fact that nearly \$20 billion are transferred home annually by migrants, making Egypt one of the top 20 receiving countries worldwide (World Bank, 2016). Second, focused on the economics of remittance transfers, it is easy to miss how the flow of information, ideas and more can effectively refocus how funds are used, invested and built over time.

AKM Ahsan Ullah's discussion of the role remittances can play in South Asian development as well as Ibrahim Sirkeci and Andrej Prívarar's move the discussion from a focus on the non-monetary and embedded nature of remittance flows to a concern with the impacts of remittances on development as well as the costs of transfers and what migrants face as they follow formal systems to transfer funds to sending homes and communities.

Ullah's review goes beyond asking simply what role remittances can play in South Asian development to focus on many of the "hidden" costs that are associated with transfers. He notes that remittances are critical to the GDP of many South Asian countries, there are expenses that we should also be aware of. Perhaps most importantly, he argues that we recognize the costs that are associated with migration. Too often our focus on the work and wages of settled migrants misrepresents the costs that a family faces as they finance migration. Other costs that migrants face include the expenses associated with daily life and money that is put aside for shelter, food, transportation, healthcare and leisure to name just a few. These costs are further complicated by the taxes, transfer fees and other expenses that migrants face as they remit. The outcome, as Ullah points out, complicates how we should think about remittances (an issue addressed in his edited volume of the same



title, see Rahman, Yong and Ullah, 2014). He discusses why our perspective must reach beyond the moment and acknowledge hidden costs as well as the adaptations, cultural practices and social formations (including *omalayisha*) that movers rely upon and develop to deal with those costs.

Thinking about the costs of remittances is at the center of Sirkeci and Přivara's discussion. The authors argue that for most movers, the costs associated with cash transfers to sending communities are quite high. In fact, they point out that for some countries, expenses have increased in recent years, making transfers all the more dear at the present. They propose more sensitive policies and a focus on dropping bank fees while enhancing services can create a more supportive environment that might, in the end, drive national development while mitigating some of the challenges movers face.

Reducing remittance practices to understanding economic flows in a social vacuum eliminates the uncertainty and insecurity that often surrounds migration outcomes (see Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011; Sirkeci and Cohen, 2016) and makes prediction facile. These articles complicate our understanding and challenge unidimensional models. The authors in this issue advance remittance theory and enhance our ability to understand not only the economic costs and benefits of remittance practices, but how those practices engage social formations, build upon cultural knowledge and challenge beliefs as well as the mechanisms (formal and informal) that facilitate transfers.

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