

Migrants – the untapped potential

Economic migrants and refugees have a decisive influence on the development of their countries of origin. Whereas the diaspora's economic impact is now undisputed, little attention has been given to its political significance. An example of this is its role in civil wars.

The economic and financial crisis has once again made clear the supreme economic importance of migrants for many developing countries. Money transferred home by those working abroad by far exceeds global official development assistance (ODA). In 2008, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), more than 200 million people worldwide were in foreign countries in search of work and an income. In that year alone they were supporting their families at home with remittances amounting to 335 billion US dollars. Around 200 million families received on average 1500 dollars to live on. On the basis of families with five members, at least one billion people worldwide were therefore dependent on the income of economic migrants.

■ The downside: a lucrative source for civil wars

The focus on the development potential of migrant remittances should not however obscure the view that contributions from diasporas also play an important part in civil wars. Some years ago Paul Collier, then economist at the World Bank, discovered that the

presence of a diaspora increased the average length of civil wars. Diaspora groups are a lucrative source for financing such wars. Their support is not however limited to financial contributions; in many wars young men return from exile, equipped with weapons to help armed opposition groups in their homelands. In some cases political activists lobby the governments in their host countries with great success. Very often, particularly in the case of separatist wars such as in Sri Lanka, Eritrea, Kosovo and the Kurdish conflict, diasporas are rigidly organised. Armed groups are increasingly organised transnationally and are extending their sphere of activity into exile.

■ Guilt as the motive

The mechanism which lies at the heart of the mobilisation of the diaspora at both economic and political levels can be termed a moral economy. In the transnational space between origin and host countries an exchange system based on moral values comes into being. It is about guilt and atonement, social norms and expectations, giving and taking, and the relationship established between the parties involved in the exchange in the interval between the gift and the reciprocal gift, as Marcel Mauss described in his book *The Gift*. For many migrants the move to another country is only pos-

The moral economy of migrants offers valuable opportunities to turn Diaspora's destructive potential into constructive involvement. – Tamil demonstration towards the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka.



Photo: K. Radtke

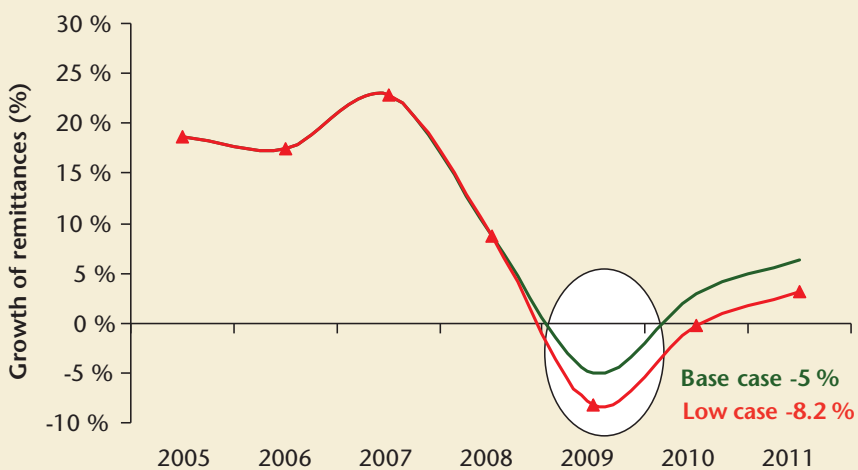
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Dramatic reduction in remittances

The collapse in migrant remittances as a result of the financial crisis is dramatic – in some cases with appalling impacts on the economies of developing countries. Owing to the reduction in economic growth fewer labour migrants are travelling to the industrialised countries. Figures are already available for some countries, including Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Tajikistan, which confirm a fall in remittances by up to 60 percent. In Tajikistan that equates to 20 percent of gross domestic product. The consequences are grave. Many families use the money sent by relatives abroad to pay school fees for their children. Because there is no money the children have to stay at home. In some cases even the children's food is no longer guaranteed if support from the relatives breaks away. For instance, in the poor districts of Haiti many people are complaining that it has become more difficult to feed their children in recent months, even though food prices have actually fallen since last year.

International remittance flows in US dollar terms



Source: Worldbank, 2009

sible as a result of immense efforts by their families. The higher the expectations of those left at home, the greater the obligation felt by the migrants to repay their "debts". Particularly in the case of refugees from civil war this feeling of obligation becomes for many a deeply felt shame and guilt. While family members, neighbours and friends endure the direct consequences of the war, the refugees are safe. Regardless of how precarious the refugees' living conditions are, every positive experi-

ence is compared with the situation in their home countries and induces feelings of guilt. Financial or political involvement offers the opportunity to atone for their own (perceived) guilt.

■ Tapping the potential for development cooperation

Despite the potentially destructive influence of diasporas in the context of civil wars, they also present opportuni-

ties for development cooperation and peace-building work. Owing to their experience of living in donor as well as receiver countries, migrants can act as mediators, helping to break down cultural and linguistic barriers and contributing to a smoother handover of projects to the target groups to manage themselves. Professional qualifications they have gained in other countries can usefully be applied in state reconstruction and development programmes. In recent years some institutions, including the Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, have in fact attempted to make use of the special role of diasporas as "travellers between the worlds", specifically in the peace negotiations in Sri Lanka. GTZ, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, has also produced numerous studies on the contribution of various diaspora groups in Germany to development in their countries of origin. However, to date the bridging function that diasporas can perform in many development processes as well as in peace-building has scarcely been used in practice. For this the existing initiatives would have to be systematised and integrated with greater commitment in development cooperation. The moral economy of migrants offers valuable leverage and opportunities to turn the diaspora's destructive potential into constructive involvement. It just has to be tapped.

For further reading

Radtke, Karin: *Mobilisierung der Diaspora. Die moralische Ökonomie der Bürgerkriege in Sri Lanka und Eritrea.* Campus Verlag, Frankfurt, 2009.

Zusammenfassung

Arbeitsmigranten und Flüchtlinge haben entscheidenden Einfluss auf die Entwicklung ihrer Herkunftsländer. Dies gilt sowohl auf ökonomischer als auch auf politischer Ebene. Erstaunlicherweise wird dieser Tatsache auf politischer Ebene aber nur wenig Interesse entgegengebracht; die Potenziale der Diaspora werden kaum genutzt. Dabei

entstehen im Rahmen von Migrationsprozessen strukturelle Anknüpfungspunkte für die Entwicklungszusammenarbeit, die durchaus erfolgversprechend sind.

Resumen

Los migrantes y refugiados económicos ejercen una influencia decisiva sobre el desarrollo de sus países de origen. Esto se

aplica tanto al nivel político como al nivel económico. Resulta sorprendente que las instancias políticas no muestren sino un interés mínimo por este hecho: apenas se aprovecha el potencial de la diáspora. Sin embargo, los procesos de migración generan puntos de apalancamiento que dejan entrever un futuro muy prometedor para la cooperación para el desarrollo.