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Session 221: Migration and Co-development 2

***The Role of the Diaspora in Development:
The case of Ethiopian and Bolivian immigrants in the USA***

Friday, October 02, 2009

3:30pm - 5:00pm

Karam 3 Meeting Room

Palais des Congres de Marrakech

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Abstract:

In this study we examine the contributions of Ethiopian and Bolivian immigrants living in the Washington Metropolitan Area to the socio-economic development of their home countries and the impacts of national government policies in facilitating development linkages. For both Bolivians and Ethiopians, Washington is the primary area of settlement in the United States. We used a mixed-methods approach to obtain qualitative and quantitative data through focus group discussions, surveys and key informant interviews in Washington, Ethiopia and Bolivia. Factors that affect the immigrants' ability to assist in home country development include: group characteristics of those who emigrated (elite, educated, poor, skilled/unskilled), the circumstances that led to their leaving the home country (better economic opportunities, war, natural disasters), their areas of origin (rural, urban), the socio-economic niches they carved out for themselves in the Washington area, and policies in their countries of origin regarding the diaspora's rights and privileges.

Introduction

In this study we examine the contributions of Ethiopian and Bolivian immigrants living in the Washington Metropolitan Area in the United States to the economic and social development of their areas of origin. Although not the largest immigrant communities in the metropolitan area, for both Bolivians and Ethiopians, Washington is the primary area of settlement in the United States. Ethiopia and Bolivia are also among the top ten sending countries to the Washington metropolitan area, which is now widely

recognized as a major U.S. immigrant destination with an extremely diverse population of over 1 million foreign-born residents (Price et al, 2005). We also assess the impacts of government policies in creating enabling (or inhibiting) environments in Ethiopia and Bolivia for investors and émigrés who might participate in development efforts in their homelands.

International migration is increasingly becoming a part of the lexicon of development as migrants transfer money and resources to their home countries, and country governments in the developing world create and set into motion policies that aim to harness the resources of members of the diaspora to promote development (Mertz, Chen and Geithner, 2007; Portes, 2006; Ratha et al., 2007; Skeldon, 2008; Zoomers, Adepoju and Van Naerssen, 2008). At the United Nations' first global forum on migration in 2006 and update forums in 2007 and 2008, the linkages between migration and development were underscored, as was the recognition that development is an integral component of the migration debate (United Nations, 2009). Yet, it is increasingly recognized that diasporas can also have negative impacts on their homelands. This can be experienced by the loss of highly skilled labor or when diasporans finance and support extremist organizations (Kapur, 2007).

We argue in this paper that members of a diaspora engage in spatial strategies that vary by specific locations and operate at different scales. Our analysis highlights contexts, institutions and networks at scales from the metropolitan area to the nation-state that facilitate (or impede) immigrant-led investment in the country of origin. By focusing on immigrant investment as both a transnational and a local phenomenon this study attempts to bridge two sets of literature—the research on diasporas and development (Gillespie et. al. 1999; Mertz, Chen and Geithner, 2007; Ozden and Schiff, 2007; Riddle et al., 2008; Wescott and Brinkerhoff, 2006) with the scholarship on urban

immigrant entrepreneurship in destination countries (Light, 1984; Aldrich and Waldinger, 1990; Kloosterman and Rath, 2001; Li, 2001; Zhou, 2004; Wang and Li, 2007).

Research on immigrants and development tends to focus on the ways that immigrant and diasporic groups channel economic and social capital to their countries of origin. Yet the dynamic and economically productive roles that these communities play in destination cities where they reside and work has been underappreciated in the diaspora literature as a critical component to the construction of diasporic networks that support development. To understand how these diasporic networks function in terms of development and entrepreneurship, it is necessary to assess both the economic and social insertion of distinct immigrant groups in the particular cities where they settle, and home country government policies that aid or deter the transnational engagement of the diaspora in development. The transnational linkages that may result from immigrant entrepreneurship are hinted at but seldom are a subject of study (for an exception see Smith 2001; Saxenian 2006).

Methodology

To understand the development linkages between immigrants and their countries of origin, the authors conducted separate focus groups with Ethiopian and Bolivian immigrant entrepreneurs as well as in-depth interviews with individual immigrants belonging to these nationalities who were living in the Washington area. We investigated the immigrants' motivations and experiences in remitting money and facilitating socio-economic development in the home country and in setting up enterprises there. We also examined the constraints and problems faced by immigrants living in the host country and those who returned to the home country permanently or to do business. We assessed the relative roles of government policies and incentives in facilitating these exchanges. In 2008 the researchers traveled to Ethiopia and Bolivia to

interview individuals such as community leaders, transnational entrepreneurs, politicians and policy makers associated with the diasporic community, to assess the linkages between immigration and development activities in these countries.

Findings

Both Ethiopians and Bolivians have leveraged transnational networks to support their communities. They have developed transnational linkages that keep them connected with their home country and regions of origin. These networks are maintained through regular communications, money transfers (remittances) to family members, raising money for specific development projects related to education, infrastructure and health in their cities and towns of origin, investment in home-country businesses, real estate, and return visits. Members of the diaspora also establish new ventures, setting up manufacturing units to produce goods for local consumption and export, and establishing and operating service facilities such as restaurants, hotels, internet cafes and retail stores.

Factors that affect immigrants' abilities to assist in home country development are: the group characteristics of those who emigrated (elite, educated, poor, skilled/unskilled), the circumstances that led to their leaving the home country (better economic opportunities, war, natural disasters), their areas of origin (rural, urban), the socio-economic niches that they were able to carve out for themselves in the Washington area and policies in their countries of origin with regard to engaging the diaspora in national development.

In 2006 remittances to Bolivia topped USD 1 billion (mostly from the United States, Spain and Argentina) and have remained at this level through 2008 (Inter-American Development Bank, 2009). The main country sources for remittances are Argentina, United States, Spain, Brazil, Chile and Japan (World Bank, 2008). Ethiopians

living and working abroad (mostly in the United States, Canada, Western Europe and the Middle East) remitted USD 1.2 billion to their home country in 2007-2008 (National Bank of Ethiopia, 2009). Both Ethiopian and Bolivian immigrants in Washington contribute to financial flows to their home countries through private money transfers, primarily to close family members and through various hometown associations.

Groups Characteristics and Circumstances

Initial cohorts of Ethiopians and Bolivian immigrants to the Washington area were political and economic migrants with a high level of education. Civil war in Ethiopia and the chronic poverty in Bolivia were the primary push factors that impelled them to leave their countries in the 1970s and 1980s. Ethiopians form one of the oldest Black African immigrant communities in the Washington area, comprising a fifth of the foreign-born population from Sub-Saharan Africa living in the region. Ethiopians in Washington account for a sizable proportion (17%) of the entire reported population of Ethiopians living in the United States. Most Ethiopians who left in the wake of the Marxist Revolution of 1974 were among the elite of their country. The Washington area was a prime destination for these immigrants who wished to settle in the nation's capital, which already had a small Ethiopian community. Over time, they were joined by compatriots who arrived as refugees and asylees, on diversity visas or on account of family reunification programs. This well educated immigrant population found jobs largely as salaried workers (86%), although a 5.3 percent were self employed (U.S. Census, ACS, 2006).

Whereas Ethiopians are an important part of the new African migration to the United States, Bolivians make up a tiny fraction (0.3%) of the nearly 21 million immigrants from Latin America (U.S. Census, ACS, 2006). Most Bolivians came as labor migrants fleeing the economic turmoil of the early 1980s when hyperinflation

ravaged the Bolivian economy. They came to Washington because there were plenty of jobs, and at the time, relatively little competition from other Latino immigrants. Today's Bolivian population, the majority of whom settled in Washington since the 1980s, are representative of Bolivia's multi-racial society of mixed Indian and European ancestry. The community grew via chain migration, by taking advantage of family reunification preferences, diversity visas and by developing an ethnic economy in which small Bolivian businesses in construction and home services grew through employing other co-ethnics and sponsoring other immigrants.

Currently, Ethiopians and Bolivians in metropolitan Washington number 27,703 and 32,344 respectively (U.S. Census, ACS 2006). Forty-four percent of the Bolivian population in the United States lives in the Washington area. Compared to the Hispanic population as a whole in the metropolitan area, Bolivians have a higher rate of educational attainment. Only 7 percent of the adult Bolivian population in Washington does not have a high school degree whereas 36 percent of all adult Hispanics have not completed high school. Similarly, only 8 percent of Ethiopians have less than high school education, while 23 percent have Bachelor's degrees and 12 percent have professional or graduate degrees (U.S. Census, ACS 2007).

There are several socio-economic measures that suggest Bolivians are well integrated into the metropolitan economy and comparatively better off than other Hispanic groups. The median household income for Bolivians was US\$57,869 in 2007; considerably greater than the median household income for the US as a whole at US\$50,740 (ACS 2007). Similarly, Bolivians show high rates of home ownership with 64.3 percent owning their home, a figure comparable to the US rate of 67.2 percent (U.S. Census, ACS 2007). The Bolivian rate of home ownership is higher than the rate for all Washington area Hispanics (native and foreign-born) at 58.4 percent. Also,

Bolivians show a tendency toward self-employment with 8 percent in this category versus the national rate of 6.7 percent in 2007 (U.S. Census, ACS 2007).

Ethiopians have a lower median household income (US \$43,460), lower rates of home ownership (37.7 percent) and lower rates of self-employment at 5.3 percent (U.S. Census, ACS 2007). These figures may be low due to the large number of refugees and asylees who joined the existing well-off Ethiopian population in Washington after the passing of the Refugee Act in 1980. Between 1982 and 1990, at least 90% of African refugees to the United States were from Ethiopia (Department of Homeland Security, 2007). Most Ethiopians in the area have put their educational qualifications to use and are employed as salaried workers in health care, educational services, professional, managerial and retail services (U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2007). Those who are self employed are likely to be in the restaurant business, in transportation (including taxicab driving), retail trade and services that cater to the ethnic community.

Places and Types of Investment in Origin Country

Members of the diaspora established new ventures in the home country, setting up manufacturing units to produce goods for local consumption and export, and establishing and operating service facilities such as restaurants, hotels, internet cafes and retail stores. The main area of investment by the diaspora in Ethiopia is in real estate development, food processing, leasing construction machinery, agricultural production, hotels, schools, health services, and information technology. Bolivians tend to invest heavily in housing, real estate, livestock, and small businesses such as restaurants and internet cafes. Most investments tend to be small family-owned businesses, a reflection of the limited capital available to individual diasporans.

The American Community Survey of the U.S. Census (2005-2007) reports that Ethiopian immigrants in Washington D.C. work primarily in education, health care and

social services (21%), followed by retail trade (18%) and then recreation, accommodation and food services (15%). According to a study by Aredo (2005) in urban areas of Ethiopia, less than 6 percent of remittances to the country go towards investments, savings or the acquisition of assets, most being used to meet basic needs. While involved in remitting money to the home country, diasporans in Washington, D.C. have also invested there. Many used the skills, experience and capital they had gained through working and operating businesses in Washington, D.C. to establish their new ventures. For example, a successful restaurateur used the capital and expertise she gained from operating her D.C. restaurant to open a small hotel in Addis Ababa. Another D.C. entrepreneur, a realtor, was actively involved in an upscale housing development for returning immigrants and well-to-do locals. Ethiopian immigrants use transnational networks to conduct business in home and host countries and the help of nuclear and extended family members to run their Ethiopia-based enterprises.

The concentration of Ethiopians in Washington metropolitan area has also allowed the community to pool and exchange information through formal as well as informal networks. Local weeklies in Amharic, websites and even social gatherings provide spaces where current social, economic and political issues that pertain to Ethiopian immigrants can be presented and discussed. Over time, these have acquired a more formal structure as organizations such as the Ethiopian American Chamber of Commerce, the Ethiopian Professionals Association Network (EPAN), the Ethiopian Business Association (EBA) and the Enterprise Development Group of the Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC) have assisted Ethiopian entrepreneurs in the city with financial advice and access to microloans in setting up their business ventures (Chacko, 2009).

In recent years, the community has focused on providing comprehensive, accurate and timely information for diasporans who are potential investors in Ethiopia via an annual Diaspora Business Forum. After being held in Ethiopia for two consecutive years, the third and fourth Ethiopian Diaspora Business Forums were held in Washington, D.C. in 2008 and 2009 respectively. At these forums, attended by several hundred members of the diaspora, the opportunities and challenges of engaging in trade and investment in Ethiopia were explored. Diaspora entrepreneurs who had invested in business ventures in Ethiopia and those who were in the process of doing so shared their experiences with the group. Participants were also introduced to U.S. government support for American investors (including Ethiopian immigrants) through USAID's Diaspora Loan Guarantee program in Ethiopia and the African Diaspora Market Place.

Bolivians have also developed transnational networks that support investment and entrepreneurship. For example, small U.S.-based Bolivian businesses and organizations foster trade in nostalgic goods (foods, clothing, and festival attire) that result in imports from Bolivia to the United States. Folkloric groups order elaborate costumes fabricated in Bolivia, while soccer leagues order uniforms produced in their home country, and small food importers—such as Irupana Andean Organic—import fair trade coffee and quinoa for U.S. markets. These are not major investments but they do support local business in the United States and Bolivia and are a direct result of transnational linkages.

The flow of remittances to households and communities in Bolivia supports increased consumption and investment both directly and indirectly. There is much written about the role of remittances and development in Bolivia (Cortes, 2004; de la Torre Ávila, 2006, de la Torre Ávila and Alfaro Aramayo, 2007). While much of these monies go toward basic needs, there is evidence that remitted funds also go to investments in housing, land, transportation and education. For example, one immigrant

family interviewed used money earned in Spain to buy two taxis and begin a small taxi service. Another family invested in looms to make woolen and alpaca shawls. The construction of immigrant-sponsored facilities such as churches, schools, health centers or plazas create employment opportunities in Bolivia and improved infrastructure.

Interviews in the Washington D.C. area provide a couple examples of how high-tech Bolivian entrepreneurs have reached out to form business linkages in Bolivia. These Bolivian 'argonauts' do not have the robust high-tech connections described by Saxenian (2004) but they are suggestive of the role that highly skilled immigrants could play in forming transnational business ventures. One company, Data Ventures, is based in Northern Virginia and is owned by a long-time Bolivian-born U.S. resident. The company develops software for financing and telecommunications. Its success in the US has led it to form relations with other South American countries, namely Argentina, Chile and Bolivia. The owner has experimented with outsourcing some computer software development in Bolivia because there are professionals there who can do this work and the costs are lower. Yet, at the same time, the uncertain political and business climate in Bolivia has made this kind of investment rare. Another Bolivian entrepreneur who runs Condor Tech, an electronic security and technology firm, has not tried to invest in Bolivian companies. Instead, he has used his resources and connections for philanthropic projects in his native country.

The diaspora can also have altruistic motives for investing in the home country and home region (Neilsen & Riddle, 2007). Almost all investments and development by immigrants target the villages, towns and cities from which they hail. Both Ethiopians and Bolivians raise money through institutions that range from regional and hometown associations to athletic leagues and clubs for specific development projects related to education, infrastructure and health in their areas of origin.

State Policies Towards the Diaspora

In recent years the Ethiopian government has played a critical role in aiding diaspora involvement and investment. Starting in 2002, the government wooed diasporans by offering them special legal status, providing tax breaks and other incentives to potential entrepreneurs and investors, lowering barriers to the import of capital goods necessary for establishing industrial units and firms, and supplying its nationals abroad with information and assistance in setting up their businesses. As a consequence of this policy, between 1992 and mid-2009, over 1,800 Ethiopians living abroad were issued investment licenses by the Ethiopian Investment Agency, more than a third of whom (39%) were residents or citizens of the United States. A substantial proportion of this group was based in the Washington Metropolitan Area. The bulk of investments were in real estate development (59%), and manufacturing (18%). Other significant investment areas of the diaspora during this period included hotels/restaurants, construction, health services, education and agriculture. Between 2002 and 2006, the Ethiopian government actively encouraged the diaspora to become engaged in economic development by allowing easier movement of capital, goods and persons into the country, and offering its expatriates economic incentives to return or invest in Ethiopia. However, in 2006 most of these special privileges were suspended.

The Bolivian government, in contrast, has not attempted to involve the diaspora in national development. In fact, by some of its recent actions it has actively discouraged diaspora engagement. In 2007, the Bolivian government introduced a tax on remittances of 1 percent. Although this is a small amount of money, it was viewed with anger by remittance senders. The following year, the Bolivian government introduced a new visa requirement for all U.S. citizens traveling to Bolivia. While the visa policy was aimed at American tourists, and is not very expensive (US\$ 100), many ethnic Bolivians, particularly those in the second generation who are born in the United

States, viewed this added financial as well as bureaucratic obstacle as a sign that they were less welcome in their ancestral home.

One of striking differences between the Ethiopian and Bolivian cases is that most of the Bolivian transnational investment took place with no formal assistance from the state. Unlike the Ethiopian case, where the diaspora was initially courted politically and economically, there is no official outreach policy to the Bolivian diaspora and dual citizenship has only recently been allowed. Currently, policy shifts in Ethiopia, Bolivia and the United States may interfere with continued transnational engagement.

In 2008 diplomatic relations between Bolivia and the United States became strained, resulting in both states expelling their representative ambassadors and thus reducing formal diplomatic contacts. In the summer of 2008 an ICE raid at a major construction site in Northern Virginia resulted in the detention and eventual deportation of over two dozen undocumented Bolivian laborers. This act, while heightening diplomatic tensions also had a chilling impact on the Bolivian community in Washington which felt threatened by a rising tide of anti-immigrant actions. The current Ethiopian government is dominated by the Tigray ethnic group. Globally as well as in the Washington metropolitan area, the Ethiopian diaspora is composed primarily of ethnic Amharas. Widening ethnic schisms between these two groups and the political mobilization of Amharas in the United States against the Ethiopian government were seen as potential threats to the state. The real and imagined challenges to existing state and ethnic structures may have led the Tigray-led Ethiopian government to rescind earlier policies aimed at promoting diasporan engagement.

Uncertainty of Diaspora-led Development

Emotional ties appear to be as important as financial gain in driving investments and development by immigrants in either country. However, the share of diaspora

investment relative to domestic private investment is low and remittance flows are highly dependent on changes in the global economy and the fluctuating needs of labor-receiving countries. The World Bank (2009) predicts that remittance flows to developing countries could decline by 7-10 percent in 2009 as a result of the global financial crisis that began in late 2008. In Addis Ababa, where most Ethiopian diaspora activity tends to be concentrated, diaspora investment in the past decade has accounted for only about 10 percent of total investments (Ethiopian Investment Agency). While there was an initial emphasis on immigrants engaging in the development of businesses and other enterprises in Ethiopia, the discontinuation of special privileges for diasporan investors in conjunction with the global economic downturn has led to a decline in investments by Ethiopians living abroad.

Within Bolivia, government actions towards the diaspora were also characterized as more antagonistic rather than supportive—especially the unpopular decision in 2007 to begin applying a fee to all remittance transfers. Despite the formal barriers to diasporic investment created by the state, it appears that the relative success of Bolivian businesses in the Washington metropolitan area has stimulated new transnational networks to form with the country of origin that influence investment patterns and entrepreneurial strategies there.

As the case studies of Ethiopians and Bolivians demonstrate, immigrant groups are often willing and able to contribute to the economic and social development of their countries of origin. They effectively use ethnic networks created in cities in which they reside to foster entrepreneurship and development locally as well as in their home countries. The countries and locales where diasporas are embedded, the composition of the immigrant groups in terms of education, wealth, ethnicity, their propensity for political and economic mobilization and the policies of their home countries affects their ability to form and sustain continued transnational development linkages. Additionally, unless

migration flows out of Ethiopia and Bolivia to developed countries continue apace, the ability to sustain immigrant-led development may depend on the willingness of integrated second and third generation immigrants to invest in the growth of the countries of their parents and grandparents.

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