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Inducing Development: Social Remittances and the Expansion of Oil Palm[1]

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This paper investigates the relationship between social remittances and land-use change in the context of South–South migration. Focusing on the cyclical movement of Filipino oil palm workers between the Philippine province of Palawan and the Malaysian State of Sabah, we show how migrants transmit social remittances, such as ideas of prosperity associated with oil palm development and knowledge of production practices and land impacts of oil palm plantations. These social remittances affect farmers' decisions to engage in oil palm development within the migrants' home province, possibly transforming subsistence agricultural systems into large-scale, monocrop plantations. We argue that such land development outcomes are an understudied aspect of how migration affects developing countries, especially in the context of South–South migration. Research findings also suggest how migrants' social remittances are transmitted, diffused, and utilized at broader social and political units, beyond return migrants' households and immediate communities in Palawan. Decision outcomes, however, are variable, with households and communities either engaging in or opposing oil palm development, depending on how social remittances are interpreted.

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INTRODUCTION

Migration has been a salient topic in discussions on international development, with agencies like the World Bank portraying migrants as the key to economic progress in poor countries (Bronden, 2012). Such optimism marks the latest phase in an ongoing debate as to how migration impacts sending nations (Faist and Fauser, 2011; Glick Schiller, 2012). While a rich body of literature has emerged from this debate, existing studies focus mainly on South–North migration flows (*see* Nyberg-Sorensen, Van Hear, and Engberg-Pedersen, 2002; de Haas, 2007; Phillips, 2009). Only recently have researchers investigated the outcomes of migration within the Global South, where migration flows tend to be temporary and a large proportion of migrants "unskilled" and undocumented (Bakewell, 2009).

Scholars have argued that South–South migration offers a greater potential to positively impact the development of sending countries. In particular, studies have shown that while migrants working in the Global South may earn considerably less compared to those in wealthier nations, they tend to remit a greater proportion of their wages and are more likely to return to their home communities as they migrate without their families (Hujo and Piper, 2007; Dustmann and Mestres, 2010). Yet, the cyclical nature of South–South migration also serves as a rich case study for the transfer of *social remittances* or the behaviors, social capital, and norms that migrants bring as they move across national borders (Levitt, 1998, 2001). There is then a need to investigate the impact of social remittances on communities that send migrants to destination countries within the Global South. At the same time, existing studies continue to struggle with questions of scale or to what extent we can attribute changes within sending communities to emigration (Hujo and Piper, 2007; Rahman and Lian, 2012). While a number of studies have examined remittance use at the household and village level (*see* Levitt, 2001; Kurien, 2002), few have explicitly determined what other changes are induced by migration at the provincial or national levels.

This paper seeks to address several of these gaps in the literature by investigating the cyclical movement of Filipino oil palm workers between the Philippine province of Palawan and Malaysian state of Sabah. Although the Philippine state is widely known for facilitating the outmigration of Filipino workers (*see* Tyner, 2009; Rodriguez, 2010),

migration flows to Sabah are largely unauthorized[2] by Philippine government agencies (Battistella and Asis, 2003). Similar to many other temporary migration flows within Southeast Asia, the movement of Filipino oil palm workers remains understudied in scholarly literature and relatively invisible in spite of its increasing frequency and scale. Conducted by social scientists from sociology and environmental studies, this research reflects theoretical approaches from both fields in addressing the question of how migration between Palawan and Sabah affects sending communities. First, we draw from studies on social remittances to show how Filipino migrant workers influence how members of their home communities make meaning of agro-industrial development projects initiated by local companies and government agencies. As one of the world's leading producers of palm oil, Malaysia has expanded its oil palm plantations, relying heavily on migrant workers from neighboring countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia (Kassim, 1997; Koh and Wilcove, 2007). In contrast, Palawan, a province still endowed with rich biodiverse landscapes, is at the cusp of massive economic development, as evidenced by the growth of agro-industrial plantations specializing in cash crops such as oil palm. Our ethnography suggests that aside from monetary remittances, Filipino oil palm workers bring technical knowledge and ideas of prosperity from Sabah, Malaysia to Palawan, the Philippines. These social remittances are shaped by their experiences and exposure to Malaysia's booming oil palm industry.

Second, we draw from environmental scholarship to argue that migrants' social remittances influence land-use decisions in Palawan. Such decisions then play an important role in whether communities support the conversion of land and the transformation of subsistence agricultural systems into large-scale, monocropped plantations. While migration scholars have long debated the effect of migration on development, there has not been enough discussion of how "development" is defined (Asis, Piper, and Raghuram, 2009; Dannecker, 2009). International organizations broadly define development as a process of enlarging people's freedoms to do and be what they value. This process includes, among others, enjoying long healthy lives, access to knowledge, and a sustainable environment

[2]The International Organization for Migration (2011) also uses the term "unauthorized" or "irregular" to refer to "movement that takes place outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, and receiving countries." This definition can include migrants who cross international boundaries without valid documents or those who stay or work in a host country without authorization.

(Alkire, 2010). In this paper, we highlight land use as an important dimension of development, where people's decisions to convert land can have significant effects on a community's future wellbeing.

The next section reviews relevant scholarship on social remittances, as well as some of the key migration and development discussions as framed by environmental and migration scholars. We then describe the methodology used in this study, the migration flows between Palawan and Sabah, and the role of social remittances on this emerging land development. This paper concludes by discussing how the Palawan–Sabah migration case contributes to two important discussions in the migration and development scholarship.

Social Remittances and Sending Communities

Recent discussions on migration and development have expanded the definition of remittances to include non-economic resources that migrants send back to their home countries (Faist and Fauser, 2011). Scholars have portrayed migrants as agents of development, shifting the literature's focus from just monetary remittances to migrants' networks, associations and experiences (*see* Faist, 2008). Economists have tended to define these remittances as technical knowledge and skills, thus portraying migration as a means for poor nations to obtain human capital or "brain gain" (Stark, 2004; Bhagwati and Hanson, 2009). However, this definition limits the transmission of non-economic remittances to highly skilled migrants, such as students and professionals, ignoring the many other forms of knowledge and ideas that migrants can bring to their home communities (Hugo, 2009).

We situate this paper among migration studies that define non-economic remittances to include knowledge, ideas, values, and beliefs that all migrants bring back to their countries of origin. Sociologist Peggy Levitt (1998, 2001) uses the term *social remittances* to refer to behaviors, identities, and social capital that migrants bring as they move between their host countries and communities of origin. Migrants transmit these social remittances as they interact with people in both sending and receiving countries, either through brief visits, telephone conversations, or migrant organizations. Levitt's work (2001) on sending communities in the Dominican Republic reveal how these social remittances can lead to mixed outcomes, either promoting more liberal gender dynamics within the family or promoting a sense of complacency among migrant households. Other researchers, while

not explicitly referring to social remittances, suggest how migration can lead to changing political values and activism, where migrants exposed to democratic participation in their host societies learn new ways to challenge social institutions within their home communities (*see* Al-Ali, Black, and Koser, 2001; Eckstein, 2010). Dannecker's (2009) study on Bangladeshi migrants in Malaysia shows how men and women develop different visions of how they want Bangladesh to change, having come from different social locations within their home communities and encountering varying experiences in their host society. She argues that these different visions can sometimes lead to conflicting forms of social and political change.

While scholars and policymakers have recognized the importance of social remittances, there continues to be limited research regarding how these remittance flows are utilized beyond migrant households and villages. Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011: 2) argue that social remittances are not only used by individuals but in "collective organizational settings." They emphasize the need to recognize migrants as "organizational actors," who act as members of hometown associations, local political parties, or cooperatives. In such cases, social remittances are "scaled up" from migrant households to broader social or political units, or "scaled out" from the family level to affect other social domains like religion or politics. Their research on migrant organizations in the Dominican Republic shows how the ideas and experiences that migrants transmit back home contribute to local government decisions on what projects to prioritize.

Yet, similar to monetary remittances, researchers encounter difficulties in tracing social remittances to changes that occur at the provincial or national level. How can we determine the extent of migrants' influence on broader social structures and institutions? In this paper, we argue that one way to trace these effects is by investigating how social remittances can influence the decisions community members make about their land and natural resources. These decisions can lead to land transformations that have important implications for the rest of the province, and potentially the nation as well. The following section articulates perspectives on the connections between migration and environment in relationship to social remittances and development.

Environmental Implications of Migration

Research on the environmental impacts of migration tends to focus on internal migration such as population movements from rural areas to

cities within countries or from one province to another. Fewer scholars have explored the environmental implications of international migration, a significant gap in the literature, given the accelerating pace and extensity of cross-border movement in the past few decades (*see* for example Cronon, 1983; Curran and Agardy, 2002).

In understanding the impacts of migration on land development within sending communities, environmental scholars have focused mainly on how monetary remittance flows and changes in social and economic institutions can influence the way people make decisions about their environment (Curran, 2002). In particular, empirical studies suggest that the influx of monetary remittances increases local families' capacity to invest in land and agriculture and consume more natural resources (Day and Içduygu, 1999; De Haas, 2006; Davis and Lopez-Carr, 2010). Such behavioral changes have been documented to result in adverse land conversions and deforestation (*e.g.,* Jokisch, 2002; Taylor, Moran-Taylor, and Ruiz, 2006). Taylor, Moran-Taylor, and Ruiz (2006), for instance, have documented how monetary remittances from migrants in the United States contributed to the conversion of rainforests into cattle pastures in Guatemala.

In contrast, other researchers report migration-influenced land-use decisions and behaviors that resulted in re-growth and recovery of secondary vegetation in sending communities (Rudel, Perez-Lugo, and Zichal, 2000; Hecht *et al.*, 2006; López *et al.*, 2006; Schmook and Radel, 2008; Holder and Chase, 2012). In such cases, the exodus of migrants was said to ease the burdens of overpopulation and resource consumption. Studies have also revealed how monetary remittances decrease the exploitation of natural resources, given how alternative sources of income prevents households from relying too much on the local environment. For instance, Naylor *et al.* (2002) showed how overseas remittances allowed Micronesian households to purchase imported fuel and building materials, hence keeping the local mangroves intact.

In contrast to the growing literature on the environmental implications of monetary remittances, fewer studies have specifically explored the role of social remittances in influencing land-use decision and change (*e.g.,* Moran-Taylor and Taylor, 2010; Aguilar-Stöen, 2012). Findings have been mixed, with social remittances viewed as either the spark that inspires sustainable living standards or as mere ideas that rarely translate into concrete action benefitting the environment. This area of inquiry remains underdeveloped and there is still much scope in engaging directly

with the social remittance literature. Furthermore, we have not encountered studies that investigate the environmental implications of South–South migration in sending communities. In this paper, we contribute to address this gap by exploring how migrants' social remittances contribute to land-use decisions in the Philippines.

METHODS

This article is part of a larger research project that the first author conducted for his doctoral dissertation in upland Philippines. This research project included 10 months of ethnography in southern Palawan from October 2011 to June 2012.[3] We visited eight communities: five are currently involved in oil palm production, while three are not but were previously approached by prospective companies. Based on our observations and the perceptions of interviewees, four of these communities have relatively large populations of return migrants from Sabah, Malaysia.

Findings in this article were drawn mainly from in-depth interviews with 52 individuals and participant observations in eight communities in Palawan. Forty-two of our interviewees included the following: return migrants who worked in Malaysian oil palm plantations; return migrants who have no work experience in oil palm but had seen the plantations in Malaysia; return migrants currently working in Palawan oil palm plantations; landowners who decided to plant (or not) oil palm in their land; and relatives of out-migrants. Most of these individuals made decisions for their entire household, while a few held political positions that allowed them to represent their entire community. The remaining ten interviewees were representatives of government bodies, private institutions and cooperatives involved in oil palm production in Palawan. These interviews provided first-hand information on the nature of migration activities, the migrants' experiences in and perceptions of the receiving areas, and the mechanisms involved in the transfer of social remittances. To supplement interview data, we also draw on field observations by the first and third authors. The duration of stay in each community ranged from a minimum of 1 week to a maximum of 3 months. These observations allowed us to see the extent of migration activity and landscape transfor-

[3]We anonymize the names of the communities, organizations, and individuals to protect the identities of our respondents. We also used pseudonyms to describe our respondents.

mation in sending communities. We also gathered secondary materials (*e.g.,* statistics, maps, and sample contracts) from relevant government and private offices.

The themes relating to ideas and knowledge of oil palm in Malaysia emerged from the first author's preliminary analysis of his larger research project. In talking to local farmers about their land-use decisions, the first author noted constant references to Malaysian oil palm development. The research team explored these themes further by conducting more interviews, including follow-up conversations with the first author's previous respondents. We coded interview data according to what participants knew about Malaysian oil palm development; how these ideas influenced their views on local oil palm plantations; and how they interacted with oil palm companies in Palawan. The succeeding themes allowed us to define the types of social remittances brought by migrants to their home communities. We also analyzed how return migrants interacted with local community members, paying special attention to the political and social status of these individuals. This data indicated how social remittances are diffused and scaled up within communities in Palawan.

Scholars have emphasized the need to investigate social remittances using a transnational approach, understanding how new ideas, norms, and values get produced and transmitted in both sending and receiving countries (*see* Levitt, 1998, 2001). Our research is limited in that we locate our ethnography in sending communities within Palawan, and not the receiving state of Sabah, Malaysia. If we had been able to conduct research in Malaysia, it would have provided important information on the actual conditions in Sabah and how these conditions shape the social remittances that Filipino oil palm workers bring back home. However, we believe that we are still able to situate our findings in a transnational social field, where the decisions Palawan farmers make are based on dynamics not just within the Philippines but Malaysia as well. Interviewees talked at length on how they developed their ideas and perceptions of oil palm, reflecting on their experiences in Sabah. At the same time, the purpose of our study is to see how these ideas contribute to decisions that have actual environmental implications in Palawan. We sought to do this by interviewing return migrants on how they shared ideas and knowledge about oil palm with people in their home communities. Consequently, the data collected through this field research can provide answers to important research questions that contribute to the literature on migration and development.

Palawan–Sabah Migration Flows

The Southeast Asian region has witnessed increasing cross-border mobility in the last 30 years. While scholarly attention has centered on emigration to wealthier nations in the West, the last few decades have also seen a significant movement of temporary migrants to countries within the region such as Singapore, Brunei, and Malaysia (Hugo, 2004). Among these migration flows, the migration of temporary workers from the Philippines to Malaysia is an exemplary case of South–South migration.[4]

Since the 1970s, Malaysia's growing economy has spurred the massive influx of working migrants from neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. The shortage of local labor in Malaysia, brought about by the restructuring of its economy and the redistribution of its workforce from rural to urban areas, compelled the hiring of foreigners (Tsai and Tsay, 2003; Ramasamy, 2004). Existing studies on migration to Malaysia examine migrants' working conditions and local responses to their presence (Crinis, 2005; Kaur, 2005; Pye *et al.*, 2012). Fewer studies have explored the implications of this migration flow for sending countries like the Philippines.

Second only to the United States, Malaysia holds a large concentration of irregular Filipino migrants, with most of these workers concentrated in the state of Sabah (Battistella and Asis, 2003). Many temporary Filipino migrants to Sabah come from the southern municipalities of Palawan. In explaining their motivation to migrate, the migrants we interviewed often referred to stories from relatives who had gone to Malaysia, enticing them to seek employment in Sabah. These migrants enter Sabah through "backdoor" passages, working as unauthorized laborers who must constantly avoid local police. A significant proportion of Filipino migrants serve as workers in oil palm or *kelapa sawit*[5] plantations, working in the nursery, clearing underbrushes, applying fertilizers and pesticides, and harvesting fruits. The return migrants we interviewed generally regard oil palm plantations as "safe havens," primarily because these areas are located in remote regions far from cities (*i.e.*, free from the surveillance of

[4]Both the Philippines and Malaysia are considered to be newly industrialized countries (Bozyk, 2006). Based on the World Bank Development Index 2012, Malaysia and the Philippines are the upper- and lower middle-income countries, respectively. Both countries are identified by the World Bank as "developing." In terms of the Human Development Index ranking in 2011, Malaysia ranks as "high" regarding human development, while the Philippines is ranked as being in the "medium" category.

[5]*Kelapa sawit* is oil palm in *Bahasa Melayu*, the official language of Malaysia.

concerned authorities). Such immigration and residency issues are the reasons why Filipinos with limited or no experience working in Malaysia end up at the plantations.

The field research suggests a significant rate of movement of Filipino migrants between Palawan and Sabah, as evidenced by the frequent news we hear about people leaving for and coming back from Malaysia. During our field research, we often encountered migrants on public transport vehicles on their way to catch the next ferry en route to Sabah. There are several possible reasons for this substantial traffic. First, the shortest distance between ports in southern Palawan and major cities in Sabah is under 500 km. Second, there are a growing number of Malaysian plantation owners who actively recruit *kelapa sawit* laborers in Palawan. According to our respondents, plantation owners lend migrants funds for transportation costs and the daily expenses of remaining family members while migrants are unable to send back remittances.[6] Although most recruited migrants are still not accorded with proper immigration documents, recruitment serves as an efficient way of ushering migrant workers into Sabah's plantation sites. Third, the establishment of oil palm plantations in Palawan allows Filipino farmers to become familiar with this crop and learn appropriate production skills. Many of these farmers eventually migrate as they become aware of the better wages paid to oil palm workers in Sabah.

Migrants' stay in Sabah varies from a few months to more than 10 years, with some cases resulting in permanent migration. Many return to Palawan after saving enough money to start new forms of livelihood or to reunite with families left behind. Although Malaysian authorities arrest and deport illegal migrants, deported workers can immediately board the next ferry en route to Sabah upon return to the Philippines (*see* Figure I).

Palawan's Growing Oil Palm Industry

Oil palm in the Philippines is an emerging industry largely driven by Filipino and foreign (usually Malaysian) consortiums. Although oil palm production in the country can be traced back to the 1950s, large-scale

[6]At this point, we are still uncertain as to the estimated percentage of temporary migrants from Palawan who work in oil palm plantations in Sabah. Our respondents claim, however, that many members of their communities have just left or are planning to leave to become *kelapa sawit* workers in Sabah.

Figure I. **Migration Pathways between the Southern Palawan and the Malaysian cities of Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan**

Source: Authors

production involving government partnerships began only in the 1980s (Villanueva, 2011). In 2009, oil palm plantations in the Philippines have been estimated to encompass at least 46,000 hectares, with more than 75 percent found in the Mindanao region and about 8 percent in the province of Palawan (Garin, 2009).

While considered nascent, Palawan has seen substantial growth in its oil palm industry, with oil palm plantations now covering 4,500 hectares of land in the province. Government agencies and private consortiums have also promoted Palawan as an ideal site for oil palm production, with plantations in the province projected to expand to at least 10,000 hectares in the future.[7] Currently, there are two private companies at the forefront of oil palm development in southern Palawan. These companies develop lands that are directly leased from local farmers and contracted through

[7]We obtained the current and targeted land area for oil palm plantations from a manager of one of the local private companies. The estimated land area does not include individual private developers.

partnerships with cooperatives. Interested landowners, mostly smallholders who own 1–10 hectares of land, are given the option to either lease out their land or join cooperatives. Cooperatives require landowners to participate in tripartite production partnerships with a local oil palm company for a contract period of 25–30 years, in which production expenses are borne by the cooperatives through a loan obtained from a state-owned financial institution. We interviewed a few landowners who engaged in oil palm production on their own without the support of either the companies or the cooperatives. Individuals who do not have land to commit can also participate in oil palm development as plantation or mill laborers.

Oil palm development in Palawan and elsewhere in the tropics has significant implications for land use, land cover, and the environment. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss these issues, thus we invite readers to refer to the current literature (*see* Koh and Wilcove, 2007; Colchester and Chao, 2011; Montefrio, 2012). Government and private sector proponents in Palawan emphasize that oil palm development in the province is isolated in unproductive grasslands and brushlands. However, our ethnography supports Villanueva's (2011) recent study, showing how oil palm development in Palawan involves encroachment on and displacement of traditional subsistence agriculture that many smallholders depend on. We observed that the most noticeable change within local communities was the large tracts of land covered with rows of oil palm. The monocrop production of oil palm also replaced second growth forests and brushlands that smallholders utilize for subsistence. Less noticeable were the usual signs of land development associated with the influx of monetary remittances, such as renovated homes (often concrete in contrast to the usual wooden structures) and "improved" public infrastructures (paved roads, buildings for community services) (Levitt, 2001; Smith, 2006). Although the full social and environmental implications of oil palm development in Palawan are yet to be seen, there is a strong indication of how oil palm production has made communities entirely dependent on plantation work and consequently less resilient to environmental shocks like droughts and typhoons (Josol and Montefrio, 2013).

While the physical presence of oil palm in Palawan is clearly growing, we found that oil palm development remained a contentious issue on the ground, with community members expressing strong feelings for or against the conversion of land into oil palm plantations. There was

explicit disagreement on whether to engage in oil palm development, often leading to conflict among relatives and neighbors. The next section discusses how social remittances from return migrants play an important role in shaping these decisions.

Transmitting Social Remittances: Knowledge and Ideas of Land Development

Farmers decided to use their land for oil palm production in anticipation of obtaining robust economic returns. However, in a previous quantitative study, the first author found that knowledge of oil palm's impacts on land is just as important in farmers' decision-making process. In this current paper, our findings suggest that in deciding to engage in oil palm development, farmers in Palawan also rely on social remittances that return migrants bring back from Sabah. Specifically, we identify two types of social remittances: (1) ideas of prosperity linked to the development of lands for oil palm production, and (2) knowledge of production practices within Malaysian oil palm plantations and its impacts on land. Drawing on interviews and field observations, this section shows how these social remittances either encouraged or prevented individuals from engaging in oil palm development.

Ideas of Prosperity: Wealth, Oil Palm, and Land Development. Migration scholars have shown how migrants often seek to change their home communities by emulating values and structures they observe within their host countries (Smith, 2006; Faist, 2008; Dannecker, 2009). In Palawan, informal conversation among community members indicated that they too, had great admiration for the growing wealth and success of Malaysia and its citizens. They talked about the tall buildings in Sabah's main cities, the wealth of their employers, and the strict standards of government officials. However, return migrants attributed a significant part of Malaysia's prosperity to its citizens' efforts in growing the oil palm industry. As expressed by Jaan, a return migrant from Sabah, "[Oil palm] is really good. You can get a lot of profit from there. My boss became rich because of this. His plantation produces a lot of fruits … and he sells them for a good price."

Return migrants did not only see oil palm as a lucrative commodity, they also perceived it as an opportunity for smallholder farmers like themselves to become wealthy. Throughout our interviews, return

migrants talked about Malaysians who started out with one or two hectares of oil palm, then gradually grew the business to a massive plantation. In this sense, they believed that planting oil palm, even in a small plot of land, was the best means to future wealth and wellbeing. Such individual stories encouraged the idea that oil palm could lead to the community prospering as a whole. As stated by Jimran, a return migrant from Sabah, "[i]n Malaysia, they prosper because of palm oil!" His brother, Owais, added, "[a]nd its not just a few who prosper … it's the whole country!" In this sense, return migrants did not simply bring back ideas of prosperity inspired by Malaysian development. Rather, they conveyed specific notions as to *how* such prosperity could be achieved. In the case of Filipino migrant workers, the route to prosperity was through oil palm cultivation.

Return migrants also expressed their support for oil palm development because it brought "improvements" to their land and surrounding environment. Abraham, a heavy equipment operator who cleared forests for oil palm plantations in Sabah, shared, "[Oil palm] is really nice to look at. The mountains there are all covered with oil palm now. It is vast…very nice. It is now hard to find land there where there is no oil palm planted." He continued, "It would be good to have [oil palm plantations] here in Palawan. It is better to *develop* our mountains with these plants." This notion of land development relates to perceptions of "the productive land," where return migrants saw oil palm as a good replacement to the "underutilized" vegetation (usually secondary forests and fallow lands) that covered their surroundings. It was common to hear in conversations with return migrants the phrases, "*sayang lang* (it's a waste)" or "*nakatiwangwang lang* (it's just left there unused)," when referring to their land. Return migrants then equate productive lands to prosperity. Nadeem, a return migrant who worked in Sabah for 4 years in the 1980s, explained, "[m]aybe that's why Malaysia is becoming rich. They made all their lands productive with oil palm." Although many non-migrants also espouse this kind of land development ethic, they have no idea of how oil palm would ultimately transform their landscape. Return migrants from Sabah helped these individuals visualize these transformations by providing mental images of the vast, productive landscapes of monoculture oil palm plantations in Malaysia.

Ideas of prosperity played an important role in migrant household decisions to engage in oil palm development. For example, one return migrant, Aida, decided to invest her land in oil palm in the hope of

becoming as wealthy as her relatives. She said, "[My husband's] nieces and nephews, now Malaysian citizens, bought 10 hectares of land in Sabah. They helped each other plant [oil palm] in that land. Now they are like sultans! Their children now have their own cars! That's why we thought it would be good to plant [oil palm]." A number of return migrants also agreed to lease out their land to a local oil palm company just because they heard that it is Malaysian-owned. They assumed that the local company would be as successful as its Malaysian counterparts and those who invested their land in oil palm would become as rich as plantation owners in Sabah. These decisions contribute to the expansion of oil palm plantations within Palawan.

Knowledge of and Experience in Oil Palm Production. Due to cyclical migration between Palawan and Sabah, oil palm companies entering Palawan found a ready pool of individuals with knowledge of and experience in oil palm production. Many of the return migrants we interviewed were currently employed in local oil palm plantations as harvesters, land clearers, and nursery growers. Some of them, especially those who had extensive experience working in oil palm plantations in Sabah, stated that they had an advantage in acquiring these local jobs. Jaan shared his experience upon his return to Palawan, "I was approached by the plantation general manager, asking if I have work experience in Malaysia. I said, 'Yes, I worked there for a long time.' He then asked me if I knew how to harvest the fruits so I showed him. I showed him how effortless it was for me. He hired me immediately after and made me a regular." Most of our interviewees were eager to enter local oil palm companies because they assumed familiarity with the work environment. Palawan–Sabah migration flows then provided a steady stream of laborers who have work experience in oil palm production.

Many return migrants also justified their decision to engage in oil palm development by weighing oil palm against local cash crops like coconuts. Although coconuts are a primary source of livelihood in most of the communities we visited, return migrants acquired the preference for oil palm because they knew that the latter could be harvested more frequently to gain greater profits. Work experience in Sabah also gave return migrants some knowledge of how to take care of oil palm, in spite of it being a non-indigenous crop in the Philippines. By moving away from coconuts, return migrants challenged traditional ideas as to what

crops can provide the best source of livelihood. This knowledge also made return migrants more comfortable in engaging with oil palm companies setting up operations in Palawan.

However, knowledge about oil palm did not always lead to positive engagement with oil palm companies. A few of the return migrants we interviewed decided against participating in production contracts because their work experience in Sabah had made them aware of how oil palm negatively affects land. These migrants had worked in plantations for a longer period of time and witnessed the environmental implications of the various cycles of production, including the phase when oil palm reaches the end of its productive life. Aahil, who worked in an oil palm plantation in Sabah, explained, "[t]hey cut down the trees that had reached 30 years. The land is already packed with roots. You won't be able to plant anything anymore. It takes time for the roots to rot and the land no longer has enough nutrients … that is why I prefer to just plant coconuts. Its roots are not as thick as oil palm's."

Some return migrants also expressed their dissatisfaction with the management practices of oil palm companies in Palawan, having compared local working conditions with those in Malaysia. As a result, these individuals declined invitations from local oil palm companies to commit their land to oil palm cultivation. As explained by Jamil, a return migrant who worked as an oil palm laborer in the 1980s, "I was going to commit my land at first, but with the way they work [referring to criticisms about plantation management in Palawan], maybe I won't anymore. I know more than them … if I had my own seedlings I would have planted on my own." Jamil knew that if he entered into a contract with the oil palm company, he would have to follow standardized production practices dictated by management. He chose to forego the company's offer, believing that he "knew more." Jamil also disapproved of the way the company handled their workers. He specifically raised the issue of delayed salaries and the lack of support for workers in terms of housing, water, and electricity.

In this section, we have shown how return migrants brought ideas and knowledge that either enhanced the image of oil palm as a positive means to prosperity, or discouraged migrant households from engaging in its production due to, for example, its adverse effects on land. Additionally, social remittances influenced the decisions of non-migrant households, distant communities, and even local oil palm companies in Palawan. We discuss these outcomes in the next section.

Scaling Up Social Remittances: Families, Non-Migrant Communities, and Private Companies

Return migrants held a special status in their home communities. Aside from their economic contributions to local households, non-migrants respected them for their "experience" in Malaysia, a country they perceived as more progressive and wealthier than the Philippines. Migrants' exposure to Malaysia's oil palm industry also made their perspectives and opinions valuable to individuals and groups thinking about engaging in oil palm development. This section discusses the mechanisms by which return migrants influence land-use decisions in Palawan. We also show how social remittances are "scaled up," when adopted by other non-migrant communities and local oil palm companies.

Family Connections. Family connections are a common mechanism by which return migrants transmit ideas and knowledge about oil palm within sending communities. Half of the non-migrants we interviewed decided to engage in oil palm development based solely on accounts provided by relatives who had worked in Malaysia. Such accounts were transmitted through direct consultation with family members and the sharing of success stories to relatives. A case in point is Muammar, a farmer who decided to invest two hectares of his land for oil palm production. Worried that the oil palm company would take over his land, Muammar was initially hesitant to participate in the production contract. He changed his mind only because his younger brother, who was then working in a Malaysian oil palm plantation, assured the family that such land disputes did not occur in Sabah. In a family consultation over the phone, Muammar's brother presented himself as someone who had knowledge on how oil palm companies operate, and his assurances made the family comfortable in dealing with the company in Palawan. At the same time, Barirah, Muammar's daughter-in-law, recalled how the younger brother told Muammar that, "If you have two hectares of oil palm, you may not need to work anymore."[8] This statement reinforced the notion that oil palm was a lucrative opportunity, and that even a small plot of land could assure the family of a comfortable life. Eventually, Muammar agreed saying, "all right, let's try … if [the oil

[8]This interview was conducted with both Muammar and Barirah, but the latter answered most of the questions.

palm] is good over there, perhaps it might be good here. If we don't try we would never know if it is good or not."

Other farmers did not directly consult relatives working in Malaysia. However, hearing about the success of family members working in Malaysian oil palm plantations was a good enough reason to engage in oil palm development. Sabri, for example, told us that his three sons had paid for all the family's debts and mortgages with their earnings from working at an oil palm plantation in Sabah. While he had never been to Malaysia himself, Sabri quickly decided to invest his land in oil palm when the first oil palm companies entered Palawan. He explained: "my sons earn so much from oil palm … that's why I said to myself it must be really good." In many ways, the knowledge and ideas developed by return migrants in Sabah gave their relatives in Palawan the confidence to invest in wide-scale production of a crop that they would otherwise be wholly unfamiliar.

However, return migrants not only bring positive ideas about oil palm development. About half of the non-migrant farmers in our study remained ambivalent about oil palm because they had heard from relatives about its negative impacts on land. They then chose not to engage in oil palm production, even if they had the land, resources, and opportunity to do so. One non-migrant, Caloy, shared, "I don't like oil palm, because by the [end of its production life] you won't be able to utilize your land anymore for other crops… in a span of 10 years, even if the oil palm is dead, its roots remain alive in the soil." He learned about the effects of oil palm on land after consulting his brother. He explained, "[m]y brother worked for a long time in Malaysia…he was a supervisor there, so he knows everything. He had seen what happens to the land and he had told me this." Overall, family connections then serve as an immediate mechanism for return migrants to spread ideas and knowledge about oil palm. Through advice and stories about their experiences in Sabah, migrants shaped the land-use decisions of relatives who had never set foot outside the province.

Non-migrant Communities. Return migrants influence not only relatives who directly seek their advice, but also other non-migrants they encounter in everyday interactions. These interactions may come in the form of active efforts to influence other people's perceptions of oil palm or simply casual conversations in non-migrant communities. In some cases, return migrants become part of organizations that allow them to have broader

coverage in influencing non-migrants. A case in point is Nadeem, a return migrant from Sabah who became a cooperative officer and was involved in actively recruiting non-migrants in his community. He recalled, "[t]he oil palm company manager said they wanted to make our community a pilot model. So I told him that I can convince many to join … I approached a lot of people to convince them to join." He claimed that he successfully persuaded many non-migrant farmers in his community to participate in oil palm production.

The influence of return migrants may even reach places far from their home communities, where outmigration to Malaysia is not as common. We found that an important mechanism in transmitting ideas and knowledge about oil palm is when return migrants interact with other farmers in public spaces like transport terminals, public markets, and convenience stores. This mechanism of transmission is evident in our interviews with non-migrant farmers. Sita, a non-migrant smallholder, said, "*They say* if you plant palm oil on your land, you won't be able to grow anything else after the contract ends. *They say* the roots will overwhelm the soil and it will stay there for a long time. The land will no longer be fertile." Amaya attested to the source of such information: "[we] hear it from other people, from *kwentuhan* (conversations). That's why we are now afraid [of oil palm]." Another is Bibang, a smallholder who said, "*Others* say that the roots of palm oil affect other plants […] and also the soil […] We just heard this from someone from Brookes Point [a municipality with high concentration of return migrants]."

The weight of social remittances on land-use decisions is even more pronounced when return migrants interact with individuals holding influential positions within communities. A case in point is an indigenous leader, Panlima Anto, who rejected an oil palm company's proposal to develop plantations in his community far from the migrant-sending communities in the Southern part of the province. In spite of pressure from the local government, the indigenous leader rejected the offer based on information provided to him by a close friend who was a return migrant from Malaysia. Panlima Anto recounted, "We were talking and he said that [oil palm] sucks up all of the earth's nutrients and that the other crops planted after will not grow well … it is like the land becomes useless (*nag inutil daw yung lupa*). He said, 'just plant coconuts and not oil palm." Panlima Anto used this information to convince the rest of his community to oppose the entry of oil palm companies. He admitted that he would have made a different decision if he did not talk to his friend,

stating that oil palm was something the community was "willing to try." While we encountered fewer individuals who chose to forego oil palm, the effect remained widespread, especially in the case of Panlima Anto, who made the decision for his entire community.

There are return migrants who admit that they engage in debates with local government officials regarding the merits of oil palm cultivation in southern Palawan. For example, Pasil, a return migrant who worked in an oil palm plantation for more than two years, shared that he often gets involved in debates over oil palm when visiting other municipalities in the province. Thoroughly convinced of the benefits of oil palm, Pasil wasn't afraid to argue with local government leaders, who did not want to engage in oil palm production. He recounted one particular conversation with a *barangay* [village] councilor:

> Sometimes I engage in debates because they are not in favor of [oil palm]. I tell them how good it is. One time I debated with a councilor because he didn't like oil palm … he's a tribal chieftain … he doesn't like [oil palm] because he thinks it brings sickness to coconuts. I said to him, 'Councilor, you have not been to other countries … I have. If you go to other countries, most likely you'd learn a lot … have you ever heard of other crops getting sick in Malaysia because of oil palm?'

In this excerpt, it is evident how Pasil used his knowledge as a return migrant worker to counter a local official's argument against oil palm. Whether or not Pasil was successful in convincing this official, such an example shows how social remittances can go beyond a return migrants' immediate social circle. Interactions with individuals who hold high political positions can serve as an important mechanism for social remittances to "scale up," given that local government officials and tribal leaders often have the power to make decisions for their entire communities. In the course of our research, we have heard of other communities where the enthusiasm of a community leader often resulted in decisions to expedite land conversion for oil palm development.

Private Companies. Another mechanism by which return migrants transmit social remittances is through company policies and procedures. While return migrants can transmit knowledge about oil palm production to their families and friends, such knowledge is scaled up when adopted and instituted into company policy. In this sense, return migrants, especially those who worked in oil palm plantations in Sabah, can also influence the management of entire palm oil production systems in

Palawan. A few of our interviewees indicated that local oil palm companies have sought out return migrants with experience in Malaysian oil palm plantations, hoping to tap into their knowledge of growing the crop. Uday, a return migrant who worked in a plantation for 4 years, claimed that a local company's general manager consulted him several times regarding a number of technical and management issues. He asserted that many of his recommendations – including ways of applying production inputs (fertilizer and pesticides) and effective ways of handling indolent workers – are now part of the local company's management practices.

While company executives know the business of oil palm production, return migrants with experience in Malaysia provide the tacit knowledge of actually caring for oil palm trees. Muhib, a return migrant who entered a local plantation upon return to Palawan, shared that he actually informed his supervisors how workers should clear more extensively the thick weeds surrounding the oil palm trees, "[Other workers] were just clearing the weeds around the base of the tree. I told them that in Malaysia, we clear the entire area under the tree so that it is easier to harvest the fruits. The supervisor followed my advice but the other workers were not happy with me."

Subtle changes in management practices may have considerable effects on land-use change when applied extensively in many plantation areas. For instance, extensive use of production inputs and more intensive clearing of underbrushes, as supposedly practiced in plantations in Malaysia, may contribute further to soil erosion in Palawan. This is an example of how the impact of social remittances is magnified when return migrants utilize their knowledge within organizations like private companies.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we provide a rare empirical investigation of unauthorized migration flows between the Philippines and Malaysia. We argue that the case of the Palawan–Sabah migration contributes to two salient discussions in the migration and development literature, particularly in the context of South–South migration. The first is the question of how migration affects poor sending nations. While this debate has preoccupied scholars and policymakers for the last 50 years, few studies actually sought to question what *kind* of development migration brings to sending communities (Dannecker, 2009). The Palawan–Sabah case illustrates how social

remittances transmitted by return migrants shape local public discourse on oil palm development, mostly encouraging the expansion of large-scale oil palm plantations. In particular, migrants bring ideas of prosperity linked to the development of land for oil palm, as well as knowledge of production practices that support the operations of palm oil companies in Palawan. Many return migrants also brought ideas about "productive land," where forested and fallow lands were portrayed as "idle" and in need of "development." These types of social remittances support the growth of oil palm development and can lead to the transformation of local environments and natural resources within Palawan. Existing studies have shown how such changes can contribute to the weakening of smallholder subsistence systems and the decline of landscape biodiversity (Villanueva, 2011; Josol and Montefrio, 2013).

Our findings suggest, however, that social remittances do not just lead to a singular outcome. Although many return migrants were strongly in support of oil palm cultivation, some Filipino oil palm workers who witnessed the long-term impacts of oil palm plantations on Malaysia's natural resources expressed concern regarding the effect of oil palm production on their lands. This knowledge and information dissuaded some community members from engaging in oil palm development in Palawan. These findings support Levitt's argument as to how social remittances can affect sending communities in multiple ways, depending on migrants' experiences in the receiving country, and their interactions when they return to their communities of origin. True enough, oil palm development continues to be a polarizing issue in Palawan. This paper shows how local disputes over development projects like oil palm can be shaped by factors beyond national borders.

This paper also endeavors to address a second dilemma found in the migration and development literature: How are social remittances harnessed beyond the individual and household level? How do we trace the impact of these remittances on local organizations and broader institutions? Our findings relate to Levitt and Lamba-Nieves's (2011) concept of "scaling up," where social remittances are utilized at broader social and political units, beyond return migrants' households and immediate communities. Currently, empirical work on social remittances have centered on political movements and hometown associations that influence local policies (*see* Smith, 2006; Rahman and Lian, 2012). The case of the Palawan–Sabah migration shows how return migrants' social remittances can also be scaled up to impact decisions about natural resources at the

provincial level. We identify three scaling up mechanisms that manifested in our research. First, return migrants transmit ideas and knowledge of oil palm development to relatives through consultations or stories. Second, return migrants actively convince, give advice (in certain cases unsolicited) or engage in debates with individuals, some of who maintain political positions in both migrant and non-migrant communities. Influencing the decisions of key individuals can have major implications for the communities they inhabit, which in most cases are non-migrant groups that have limited access to monetary remittances. Third, oil palm companies seek return migrants for technical advice on running production operations in Palawan. Social remittances then shape the management and operation of oil palm plantations in Palawan, which may also have land development implications. Given the heterogeneous nature of both migrant and non-migrant groups (the receivers and interpreters of social remittances), the scaling up of social remittances can also lead to different effects at broader social and political scales. The dissemination of social remittances at these higher levels results in either greater engagement or refusal to cooperate in oil palm development in Palawan, depending on how migrant and non-migrant individuals interpret and engage in such development discourse.

The Palawan–Sabah case also implies the usefulness of investigating social remittances by looking at its development implications on the environment. While Filipino oil palm workers may not remit enough economic remittances to make profound changes in their home communities, their social remittances can influence local farmers' engagement with oil palm cultivation. Scholars have noted how these decisions can either provide economic benefits for the entire community or cause environmental problems associated with such massive land development (Villanueva, 2011; Josol and Montefrio, 2013). By looking at the issue of land-use change, we see that social remittances can potentially play a more significant role than monetary remittances, a finding that illustrates the benefits of alternative approaches to understanding the impact of migrant remittances on sending communities.

More generally, the effect of social remittances on environmental change is understudied in the current literature. While we focus on South–South migration, there is a need for further research on the transmission of ideas and knowledge of the environment in the context of South–North and North–North migrations. As seen in the Palawan–Sabah case, these social remittances can influence local politics, expedite development projects, or reinforce resistance among local communities.

We believe that these outcomes can also occur in other sending communities beyond the Global South.

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