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Sub-theme 06

Performing the Future Communicatively: How What Does Not Yet Exist Already Makes a  
Difference

**‘I can do many big things’: The imagined futures and future-making  
activities of transnational migrants**

Draft Version

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## **Abstract**

This study aims to advance our understanding of how imagined futures are activated and made real by looking at the aspirations and future-making activities of a group of transnational migrants. It builds on the sociology of imagined futures, notably pragmatism, which assumes that actors' anticipation of the future changes with new experience and that imagined futures are a critical component of human reflexivity and agency. Migration is not only about geographical mobility but also about how people experience transitional and transformational passages through space and time. The study examines how migrants' imagined futures are triggered by biographical transitions, exposure to diverse socio-cultural environments and encountering new significant others/peer groups in the host country context. The empirical evidence is based on individual interviews with 22 highly educated migrants who had returned to their home communities in Ethiopia, following a period of professional development and working in developed countries. The developed-developing country migratory context reveals the relational forces and disjunction that stimulate cognitive reorientation and creative imagination of alternative future possibilities. The analysis shows how the returnees' imagined futures are made real through acts of intervention in the workplace and material connection to the locality. It sheds light on 'projective agency' and the process through which aspired futures are brought into the present through future-making activities both at the individual and collective levels.

## **Keywords**

Aspirational learning, future-making, imagined futures, mobility, transnational migrants, projective agency

## **‘I can do many big things’: The imagined futures and future-making activities of transnational migrants**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The idea that imagined futures play a crucial role in influencing social actions has long been recognised across the social sciences. Major sociological theories - from the classical work of Weber, Shultz, Mead to the late modernity theory of Giddens - have all taken account of actors’ expectations, aspirations and perceptions of the future as an important element of the social (Suckert, 2022). Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) influential work on ‘agency’ highlights imaginative engagement of the future as a key driving force of human effort. Beckert (2013) refers to imagined futures as ‘fictional expectations’ that serve as a source of action and novelty. Likewise, research in social psychology reveals that imagining a desired future can act as a motivational force for action (Aspinwall, 2005; Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). Of late, scholars in management and organization studies have also shown a growing interest in studying imagined futures for understanding strategy and entrepreneurship (Garud, Schildt, & Lant, 2014), creativity and innovation (Oomen, Hoffman, & Hajer, 2022; Thompson, 2018) and alternative forms of organizing (Gümüşay & Reinecke, 2022). Despite the burgeoning literature, empirical investigation into how actors produce and enact imagined futures remains limited (Wenzel, Krämer, Koch, & Reckwitz, 2020).

This study contributes to our understanding of how imagined futures are activated and made real by looking at the aspirations and future-making activities of a group of transnational migrants. The analytical framework builds on the sociology of imagined futures, notably pragmatism, which assumes that actors’ anticipation of the future changes with new experience and that imagined futures are a critical component of human reflexivity and agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Mead, 1972). Migration is not only about geographical mobility but also about how people experience ‘transitional and transformational passages through space and time’ (Cangià & Zittoun, 2020 :646). The transnational migratory context is particularly useful for investigating the sources and consequences of imagined futures because the experience of mobility across different socio-economic contexts and value regimes can trigger cognitive reorientation and awaken aspirations. The study focuses on how migrants’ imagined futures are triggered by biographical transitions, exposure to diverse socio-cultural environments and encountering new significant others/peer groups in the host

country context. It argues that transnational migrants' 'knowledgeability' (Giddens, 1984) across multiple social contexts and their 'aspirational capability' (Appadurai, 2013) provide them with relational and personal resources to bring imagined futures into a realizable course of action.

The empirical evidence is based on individual interviews with 22 highly educated migrants who had returned to their home communities in Ethiopia, following a period of professional development and working in developed countries. The developed-developing country migratory context reveals the relational forces and disjunction that stimulate cognitive reorientation and creative imagination of alternative future possibilities. The analysis highlights the returnees' agentic effort in negotiating and recontextualizing what they have learned overseas to make it relevant to the home context. It shows how their imagined futures are made real through acts of intervention in the workplace and material connection to the locality. The study sheds light on 'projective agency' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Mische, 2009) and the process through which aspired futures are brought into the present through future-making activities both at the individual and collective levels.

## **CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORK**

### **Imagined futures and projective agency**

The sociology of the future views future orientations as causal factors influencing social action and outcomes. The relevance of imagined futures as a crucial component of conscious human action and reflexivity is most clearly shown in the work of pragmatist theorists, notably Alfred Schutz who argues that courses of action are chosen by 'projecting' which 'consists in anticipation of future conduct by way of phantasying' (Schütz, 1972 :20).

Likewise, Dewey (1981: 69) asserts that human intelligence is based upon the capacity to 'read future results in present ongoing'. Building on this line of thought, Emirbayer and Mische's (1998: 988) theory of agency highlights the 'projective capacity' of human agency by shifting the analytical attention away from actors' orientation towards the past and focusing on how agentic processes 'give shape and direction to future possibilities.'

Projective agency denotes the 'hypothesization of experience' as actors 'move beyond themselves' into the future and construct images of new possibilities. It entails the capacity of actors to reconfigure received patterns of thought and action in relation to aspired futures.

Actors' anticipations of the future rely on their interpretation of the present (Mead, 1932) and evolve with new life experience and circumstances (Appadurai, 2004). Social comparisons and learning from the experience of relevant others are important sources of aspirations. 'Aspiration' denotes the intention to exert effort to achieve certain goals or desired future end-states. Migration has long been associated with aspirations, hope and the construction of futures (Carling & Collins, 2018; Pine, 2014). It may widen individuals' social networks and reference communities that influence the width of their 'aspiration windows' (Ray, 2006) and the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004). An individual's aspiration window is influenced by the sets of persons or peers within their social networks which set the boundaries or reference points around future possibilities (Ray 2006). Mobility across social boundaries can expand an individual's aspiration window for future possibilities. The 'capacity to aspire' is where actors can both envision the future and their capacity to shape this future. Appadurai (2004) argues that the capacity to aspire is bounded by the resources of a particular social context and thus developing new connections may enhance the capacity to aspire and envision alternative future possibilities. The encounter of problematic situations in a new social context may also stimulate critical re-evaluation of the present and exploration of alternative future possibilities (Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

A body of research reveals that aspirations for a desired future empowers individuals and serves as a motivational force for action (Aspinwall, 2005; Miyazaki & Swedberg, 2017; Vasquez & Buehler, 2007). Studies also suggest that aspirations about the future can make a tangible difference to social and economic outcomes (Beckert, 2016; Borup, Brown, Konrad, & Van Lente, 2006; Niedziałkowski, 2019).

### **Knowledgeability of transnational migrants and construction of futures**

Transnational migration represents unsettled times (Swidler 1986) in individuals' life experiences and exposes them to diverse socio-cultural environments and unfamiliar practices. It provides a distinct opportunity for learning, creative sensemaking and cognitive re-orientation (Williams 2007; Blyth 2002). This study posits that the 'knowledgeability' of transnational migrants across the boundaries of multiple locations and social contexts can be an important source of aspirations and imagined futures. The term knowledgeability refers to individuals' knowledge or awareness of the circumstances of their actions and the rules they follow (Berends, Boersma, & Weggeman, 2003). It originates from Giddens' (1984)

structuration theory which posits that the interaction between knowledgeable actors and existing structures provides a source of change because awareness of the rules or contexts gives people the capacity to imagine alternative possibilities and ‘act otherwise’. It is the basis of human agency enabling the reconstitution of resources and renegotiation of practices (Sewell Jr, 1992). Coe and Bunnell (2003, p. 438) argue that transnational migrants are ‘knowledgeable’ individuals because they embody new ideas and knowledge that is of value to others, and can enact knowledge transfer by moving across space through transnational networks. Similarly, Basch et al (1994, p. 6) refer to them as ‘mobile knowledgeable subjects’ who forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations in both their home and host countries. Relatedly, others draw attention to the social skills and relational competences that they have acquired from their work experiences in migratory settings and engagement in transnational networks (Grabowska 2018; Levitt 1998). Diverse social networks and relational interactions influence aspirations and imaginations in significant ways. As underlined by Dewey (1981), our imagination of future projects and alternative possibilities are formed in interaction with others.

Migrants may also develop ‘critical reflective’ capacities arising from their transnational mobility and distinct learning experience. These people may develop a particular capacity for reflexivity because they can draw on their previous knowledge and experience to gain a deeper understanding of the particularities of knowledge and practices embedded in different locations (Williams 2007). Furthermore, the disjuncture between host and home country experiences can also stimulate reflexivity and generate unexpected insights. Grabowska (2018) speaks of ‘migratory aha moments’ when people experience surprises and realise differences. The encounter with ‘problematic situations’ challenges actors’ established assumptions and demands renegotiation of meanings and practices. As such, the knowledgeability of transnational migrants is manifested in their ability for reflexivity and critical distancing resulting from their exposure to alternative or new experience. Reflexivity is a source of human agency that allows for greater imagination, choice and conscious purpose. It is in the process of such deliberation that actors make sense of and construct imagined futures.

The knowledgeability of return migrants may also have an ‘aspirational’ dimension in that the realization of novelty or different ways of doing things induces them to search for and create alternative future possibilities in their home contexts. The notion of ‘aspirational capability’ refers to a projective, future-oriented mindset that drives motivation and

achievement. It is an ability to envision future states and fashion one's behaviour accordingly (Aspinwall, 2005). It is similar to Bandura's (2001) notion of 'forethought' that motivates people's actions in anticipation of future possibilities. Learning, by nature, has an aspirational component because the new knowledge acquired can serve as the basis for developing future possibilities or alternative courses of action (Marquardt, 1996). The propensity of individuals to envision alternative future possibilities can be enhanced by transnational learning that exposes them to diverse cultural perspectives, images and ideas coming from elsewhere (Koehn & Rosenau, 2002). The desire to achieve imagined desired futures can be a powerful motivator for return migrants' engagement in knowledge transfer and futuring practices. For example, research on highly skilled diaspora returnees in Africa shows that these people forged their diasporic identity in an projective manner, and were motivated by their desire to contribute to the future of their home countries through local engagement and knowledge activities (Meyer & Wattiaux 2006).

### **Future-making: Performativity, material embedding and work of reconciliation**

How do imagined futures become real and socially performative? What actions could be taken to realize new possibilities? Addressing these questions calls for a shift of attention from 'imagined futures' to 'future-making'. The sociology of expectations and more recent work in organization studies provide useful insights here.

In contrast to Mead (1932) who considers the 'future' as being of the mind, of imagination and with no material existence, scholars of the sociology of expectations highlight the materiality and performativity of expectations and imaginaries of the futures. van Lente (1993: 191) stresses the 'doing' aspect of expectations as articulated in statements and scripts: 'advising, showing direction, creating obligations'. Borup et al (2006: 289) argue that expectations are part of the world of action: they are performative in that they attract the interest of necessary allies, define roles and build mutual obligations and agendas. Tutton (2017) goes further by highlighting the mutual entailment of the material and discursive aspects of the imagined future as enacted in practice. This version of performativity points to an understanding of the enactment of the future in both socio-political, legal and economic terms as well as in mundane everyday performative, enacting practices. In a similar vein, an emerging literature in socio-cultural theory and organization studies explores how abstract imaginations of the future can be made real through performance, enactment and material

embedding in social practices (Comi & Whyte, 2018; Oomen et al., 2022; Thompson & Byrne, 2022).

The above literature gives crucial insights into how imagined futures are given forms in the present through material things and social practices, and thus making them amenable to further work. However, two pertinent questions remain unanswered: a) how do actors resolve the tension between aspired futures and the constraint of the present? And b) How do they negotiate legitimacy and gain support for their futuring practices? These questions concern the social alignment and coordinative aspects of future-making. This study employs the concept of ‘work of reconciliation’ from Wenger’s (1998) theory of situated learning to explore these aspects. Wenger’s theory elaborates on how individuals who operate across different communities negotiate their knowledge and practices by undertaking the ‘work of reconciliation’ to reconcile differences and resolve tensions. It distinguishes three modes of reconciliation: ‘engagement’, ‘alignment’ and ‘imagination’. ‘Engagement’ refers to individuals’ active involvement in mutual processes of negotiation of meaning and the development of shared practices. ‘Alignment’ refers to coordinating one’s efforts and activities so that they fit within broader structures and connect with the wider social systems. ‘Imagination’ is about seeing oneself in a broader context and making connections across space and time and envisioning alternative future possibilities. The theory postulates that the productive combination of these modes of reconciliation is critical for resolving tensions between imaginations and realities. For example, the combination of imagination and alignment enables the anchoring of individuals’ broad visions within the context of what they are doing and making it effective in concert with others.

For transnational migrants moving from one societal context to another, the work of reconciliation can be particularly challenging. This is especially so for those highly skilled people who have returned from developed host countries to developing home countries where their aspired futures based on newly acquired knowledge, practices and values encounter the realities built on ‘old’ knowledge, modes of behaviour and assumptions. The empirical study examines the disjuncture experienced by returnees and their work of reconciliation in realizing their imagined new possibilities.



## **THE EMPIRICAL STUDY**

### **The developed-developing country migratory context: Ethiopian transnational migrants**

The study looks at a group of highly skilled migrants who had returned from the developed countries to Ethiopia – one of the world's least developed countries. Ethiopia serves as an extreme case for this study because it reveals the challenges of transferring knowledge and practices between the developed and developing worlds characterized by wide development gaps and significant cultural/institutional distance. The developed-developing country migratory context provides a relational setting for examining the transnational learning experience of migrants in response to surprises, conflicts and contradictions (Grabowska, 2018). The experience of these transnational migrants illustrates how their connection to two very different environments may stimulate cognitive re-orientation and creative imagination of future possibilities. The disjuncture between the host and home migratory contexts creates a demanding situation for the realization of imagined new possibilities whereby the renegotiation of meanings and practices is necessary. Ethiopia, like many other countries in Africa, is characterized by weak formal institutions and heavy reliance on informal institutions and indigenous knowledge in various aspects of its socio-economic and socio-political activities (Zoogah, Peng, & Woldu, 2015). This creates an ambiguous environment that poses additional challenges for highly skilled return migrants who seek to harness the knowledge and perspectives that they have acquired overseas and to realize their aspirational hopes in their home environments. The chosen migratory context thus offers an ideal setting for exploring the relational forces that induces imagined futures and the agentic effort required to engage in future-making activities.

Ethiopia is one of the major migrant sending countries in Africa and has suffered from severe brain drain especially in the medical and healthcare sector, and institutions of higher learning (Adugna, 2019; Getahun, 2002). Emigration from Ethiopia started in the mid-1970s with the Marxist revolution and the installation of the military regime. The social and political turmoil that ensued set in motion large scale emigration which continues today with skilled migrants seeking opportunities in other parts of the world. This domestic push factor, coupled with the global pull factor, has resulted in huge loss of skilled personnel. Recent Ethiopian government data puts the estimate of Ethiopian diaspora at over three million, mainly residing in the US, Middle East, and Europe (Adugna, 2019).

In order to redress the problem of brain drain, the Ethiopian government, in common with other African countries, has been actively developing diaspora engagement policies since the early 2000s (Chacko & Gebre, 2013). Measures such as introducing investment incentives for diaspora members, offering dual citizenships and promoting diaspora professional networks have enticed a growing number of professional and high-skilled migrants to return to the country. Recent research suggests that the impact of migration on the home community is increasingly manifested through the transnational engagement of the high-skilled migrants and their business and knowledge transfer activities in their origin home communities (Lituchy, 2019). This study looks at the experience of a group of highly skilled return migrants to shed light on how they exercise imaginative agency when envisioning a different future through knowledge transfer and future-making activities.

## **Methods and data**

This is a qualitative study based on individual interviews with 22 highly educated Ethiopian returnees across a range of professional fields. All the interviewees have acquired postgraduate qualifications at the Master or PhD levels in the developed countries: USA, Europe and Japan. The majority had worked in their professional fields for a period (2-25 years) in the host countries, following their advanced education/training there. Table 1 shows the profiles of the interviewees.

The interviews were conducted in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. The semi-structured interview protocol was initially designed to focus on transnational learning and knowledge transfer but the ‘aspirational’ component of learning and the theme of ‘future orientations’ emerged clearly in the early interviews. Thus, the questions were adapted to explore these aspects deeper in subsequent interviews. Interviews lasted for about 60-75 minutes each and were recorded and transcribed. In addition, other relevant documentary information obtained via web searches, such as the CVs or LinkedIn pages of individuals and press releases on the Ethiopian government’s returnee engagement activities, also provided valuable data. For example, one of the interviewees mentioned his involvement in diffusing Kaizen work practices at home after his return from Japan. The author conducted web searches and found articles and blog posts written by him on the topic and documentary evidence of his involvement in setting up the Ethiopian Kaizen Institute.

## **Data analysis**

The data analysis followed an abductive approach (Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011), iterating between the data and concepts in an interpretative manner in several stages. It used a combination of NVivo software and manual coding in the first stage of open coding to identify core themes and emerging patterns. The initial analysis explored the interviewees' overseas learning and work experience, and how these had altered their expectations, perceptions and aspirations. A notable insight that emerged early on was the 'aspirational' component of the returnees' transnational learning alongside technical and socio-cultural learning. Based on this, a loose initial framing was developed which facilitated the progression from open to focused coding for the knowledge/competences, value orientations and relational networks acquired and their expectations for deploying what they had learned overseas in their home contexts. At this stage, a coding summary sheet was used to record the narratives and examples that illustrate their 'aspirational' learning experience, desired future possibilities and the events/stories of how they sought to make their overseas learning relevant to their work and professional activities back at home. Through 'progressive focussing' (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012), the analysis identified two distinct processes that revealed the returnees' 'work of reconciliation' in resolving the tension between imagination and realities: a) creation of organizational spaces for engagement and alignment; and b) engagement in future-making activities that entail imagination and alignment. Finally, four focal cases were identified that most clearly exemplify future-making activities in realizing imagined new possibilities.

## **MAIN FINDINGS**

### **Transnational mobility, aspirational capabilities and imagined futures**

Transnational mobility represents a major biographical turning point in individuals' life experiences and provides a distinct opportunity for learning and the development of 'critical reflective capability' (Williams, 2007). Especially for highly skilled migrants, the learning and exposure in a transnational setting is not only instrumental for professional development but can also be potentially transformative in terms of personal development and cognitive reorientation. The analysis shows that the disjuncture between host and home country experiences challenges the transnational migrants' established assumptions and demands renegotiation of meanings and practices. The realization of contextual differences and

exposure to new practices stimulated critical reflective thinking and prompted the returnees to re-evaluate the work practices back at home. What was once accepted as normal and taken-for-granted is now seen as problematic. One academic researcher, for example, came to the realization that poor time management in his former workplace had led to ‘a lot of institutional inefficiency’ and ‘hindered’ his work (Case 13).

Among those returnees who had studied and worked in Japan, many talked about their initial ‘cultural shock’ when confronted with Japanese ways of doing things that were ‘totally different from African...’. Some described their experience as ‘transformative’ and expressed their deep admiration for the Japanese work ethics and quality management practices (e.g. ‘Kaizen’):

Well, I would say it was *very transformative* because, you know, you are doing your education in a very different environment. So before I went to Japan I heard about this East Asian development experience from the media and different literatures, but I have never studied that in-depth. So that was a good opportunity for me to go to Japan and then see the East Asian experience ... Yes, another thing is that there is this thing, they called Kaizen’ (Case 5; Academic researcher; *emphasis added*).

What excites me is, like Japan is a very nice country, you know, and they are very serious especially about quality, infrastructure and services... *I’m just jealous...* Like if you are reading, you can’t acquire a lot of knowledge but once you have seen something *you never forget*’ (Case 9; Engineer; *emphasis added*).

Expressions such as ‘very transformative’, ‘I am jealous’ and ‘you never forget’ all indicate the strong imprint of transnational mobility on the returnees as they transform their ‘seeing’ and ‘experiencing’ in a very different social context into their own personal biography and perspectives. Being jealous, for example, is a mental state associated with the desire to emulate or to raise oneself to a state of equality with others with whom one compares with oneself (Gesell, 1906).

Social comparison and the encounter of new peer groups are important sources of aspirations about future possibilities (Mani & Riley, 2019). For example, one returnee from the US expressed his desire to replicating his professional experience back at home:

My experience in the US has been very, very good and I believe that experience, if that experience can be replicated here, this country [Ethiopia] can benefit a lot.. The

idea is to bring those experience, you know, best [engineering] practices and see if they can be incorporated here (Case 6; Urban Planning/Environmental Scientist).

Another stressed the relevance of learning from his overseas colleagues who had become part of his reference community that provided resources for envisioning new possibilities:

...So you see, you have the chance to meet people from different countries, so you ask them, “Why is Vietnam doing well?” If you are here you don’t have a chance, you know, to meet those kind of colleagues, so you get a lot of experience and knowledge that can be useful here [Ethiopia] (Case 5; Think-tank researcher).

The interview narratives also reveal the development of ‘aspirational hope’ (Snyder, 2002) arising from the individuals’ exposure to diverse socio-cultural and work environments, and knowing alternative ways of doing things. In the interviews, many expressed their newfound confidence in doing new things and confronting challenges at home. Several used the expression ‘to think big’ to articulate their desire to develop new professional goals and capture emerging opportunities. The following quote is illustrative:

‘The best opportunity is here actually. Yeah, I’m thinking about big projects. To think big I have to get more knowledge, also I have to have good linkage...

Individually *I can do many big things* and I just have this perspective now’ (Case 22; Government officer; emphasis added).

This positive, forward-looking orientation was shared by another, an academic researcher, who took pride in his success in building a big house following the completion of his PhD overseas and an increase in income. For many migrants, a house in their hometown represents a social symbol and material realization of their aspirations for a good life (Serrano, 2017). This academic returnee used the big house as an example to narrate his ‘vision’ for the future and the actions needed in the present.

I can’t continue living on a rented house, then I got land, I started constructing my own house, because my vision was that, wait, I should have a big house [laugh]. ..So now the foundation was constructed...Now I will create capacity in the future, capacity will come in the future, I do have more opportunities in the future. *Our vision cannot be limited by the existing capacity.*’ (Emphasis added).

The returnees’ aspiration to realize alternative future possibilities was not limited to their personal or professional goals, but also extended to their expectation of possible system

change. For some, the personal experience made them more acutely aware of the developmental gap/disjuncture between the developed (host) and developing (home) countries. This appears to instil in them a ‘catching-up’ mentality and the desire to do something positive back at home. One engineer, who had professional training in Europe in his early career and was now in a senior position in the Ethiopian Railway Corporation, reflected on his sentiment and vision for the future of his country:

...in the industrialised or developed countries like UK or US. Yes, you have everything at your fingertips, but this has not been there hundred years ago, it has come through time, it has come through knowledge, it has come through a concerted effort, it has come through the good strategies of government and so on, so that should be the mentality. If something is not working in your house or if you go to a bank and it’s not working, you could say: “ yes, today it has happened so tomorrow it shouldn’t happen”. We have to work towards improving all these.

Transnational mobility and overseas experience not only provided the returnees with the knowledge of alternative possibilities but also led them to envision better futures for themselves and their workplaces or society at large.

### **‘Work of reconciliation’ in future-making: from small changes in the workplace to national capacity building**

What actions did the returnees undertake to render their imagined futures performative? How did they resolve the disjuncture between what they had learned overseas and the experience back at home, and between their aspired futures and the constraints of the present? This section examines the returnees’ ‘work of reconciliation’ in future-making by presenting four focal cases. They show the development of future-making activities that aim at changing the workplace or society at large to an imagined better future state. The returnees took small steps to realize their desired future possibilities. Their future-making effort entails the productive combination of ‘imagination’ with local engagement and alignment in that they seek to realize their aspired future visions in concert with others.

*An office printer for improving the work environmen: Case 12*

This is a think tank researcher who obtained his PhD in Denmark and also had worked for two years as a post-doctoral researcher in the UK. He returned to his former research organization after having spent seven years overseas. While recognizing that his overseas academic training was ‘technically a very good experience’, he stressed that the most relevant and useful knowledge acquired was ‘ways of doing things and how things are organized’ and ‘*knowledge about what could be possible*’ (emphasis added). His overseas experience had made him aware of what a good research environment should or could look like, and the desire for seeking improvement back at home. In the interview, he spoke about his attempt to transfer his overseas work experience and make small changes in his workplace at home:

These are things I don’t necessarily learn at the School [in Denmark], but these are things that you see around and stuff like that that actually enhances the way you do things. And definitely there is transfer that this is how I do things... It doesn’t have to be very technical sometimes, but it’s the way things are organised, and we have a lot of institutional issue, like there are quite a lot of differences in terms of research institutes set up here, as opposed to in Denmark or UK or elsewhere, so it is small changes.

One notable example was his request for an office printer, equipment that was ‘just there’ in the research institute in Denmark but not readily available back home in his workplace:

I mean even a simple thing, if you go around in each office [in Denmark] you’ll see a printer, and so a printer is just there, where actually you can use and stuff like that, so these things, you say, like this is how things should be...

In the interview, he also spoke about the possibility for the returnees in his organization to start building the momentum to develop the ‘kind of systems’ that they had seen overseas. His effort in engendering incremental small organizational changes appears to be influenced by his experience overseas as well as his imagined possible future for his workplace back at home. The ‘office printer’ is a material artefact that provides an anchor and symbolizes a possible, better future.

#### *Creating promissory organizations for diffusing new work practices: Cases 9 and 5*

These cases show the pivotal role of two returnees from Japan in creating ‘promissory organizations’ (Pollock & Williams, 2010) for advocating, experimenting and diffusing

Japanese-style productivity improvement work practices – Kaizen. Case 9 created an entrepreneurial start-up and Case 5 was instrumental in facilitating the setting up of a national Kaizen institute. Both the entrepreneurial start-up and the Institute serve as a kind of ‘promissory organization’ (Pollock and Williams 2010) whose purpose is the creation and dissemination of expectations for improving work practices and productivity in the SME sectors in Ethiopia. They provide organizational spaces for local engagement and alignment in realizing new possibilities.

Case 9 was a long-serving public sector employee who obtained an MA qualification in engineering in Japan and decided to form his own start-up company soon after returning to his former employer in Ethiopia. In the interview, he stated that his main motive was ‘to start from the scratch to make things right’. His exposure to Japanese work discipline and quality standards made him acutely aware of the absence of these at home: ‘We don’t demand quality materials, here in Ethiopia there is no project completed within specific time... Because everybody is very negligent’. What was previously taken-for-granted had become disconcerting and triggered response actions. His overseas experience instilled in him a sense of optimism about new possibilities back at home and the desire to ‘do something better or lasting’ and ‘to be part of this history’, to put it in his own words. However, he perceived insurmountable institutional and attitudinal barriers to change in the public sector and reckoned that forming a private company would give him a fresh start and a protected organizational space for experimenting with Japanese work practices.

The narratives in the interview were permeated with stories about how he strived to emulate Japanese ways of working in his interaction with employees and business clients:

‘Actually what I did to my crew is like, it’s a lot of things but especially every week we have a [team] meeting... I try to import something that is good. You know, people will change when they see the results’.

His approach was to start with small things in everyday work routines such as adopting Japanese-style team approach within his company and building trust with his clients by ensuring that projects were completed on time: ‘Look, it might seem very, very small things but you can feel it. It changes things totally’. The entrepreneurial start-up, in this case, operates as a promissory organization that articulates the returnee’s vision for better ways of doing things. It also serves as a vehicle for influencing and engaging the local actors in diffusing and implementing new work practices.



Case 5 is a PhD graduate returnee who played a pivotal role in facilitating the setting up of a national Kaizen institute for promoting and disseminating Japanese work practices at home. He was a think tank researcher who obtained his doctoral degree in Development Economics in Japan. During his time in Japan, he conducted research with his Japanese professor on Kaizen management techniques for productivity improvement and was actively involved in mission studies to other East Asian countries to learn about their development experiences. This wide exposure to new environments and interactional experience with role models – his professor and academic peers - trigger his expectations and optimism about the economic future for Ethiopia and the desire to return home. This echoes research in cultural and economic sociology that stresses the influence of social networks and interactional experience on actors' imaginaries of the future (Ray, 2006; Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). In the interview, Case 5 revealed his enthusiasm for experimenting with Kaizen work practices at home by mobilizing his transnational relational resources:

Well, I wanted to come back because, you know, as I told you I had this good linkage with the government officials here and also I was, you know, connecting the Japanese side, you know, so for example the Kaizen issues, the Japanese research mission. So, I wanted to be here, you know, we have all the networks, we can access them from here, in fact in a much better way [*laughs*].

After returning, he continued to engage in research about Kaizen techniques and used academic writing, policy reports and blog posts, as 'instruments of imagination' (Beckert 2021) to articulate his vision for learning from the East Asian experience and advocate the implementation of new business skills in sub-Saharan Africa. The following statement from one of his blogposts is indicative:

This [low product quality or productivity] was the problem many of the East Asian countries' enterprises faced during their early stage of development but have successfully solved them by introducing business skills that enable entrepreneurs to escape the low-quality trap. Thus, it became evident that imparting such skills will help enterprises grow and engage in multi-faceted innovation in Sub-Saharan Africa...The best way in terms of both cost and capturing the required knowledge is to learn from countries that have institutionalized skill formation and quality control mechanisms in their private sector enterprises. An outright candidate would be Japan.

His advocacy and persuasion subsequently led to a collaborative project with his former Japanese professor, with funding from the Japanese government, to conduct a pilot study of transferring Kaizen to Ethiopia. The study involved bringing over a team of Japanese Kaizen experts to train 30 local SMEs and evaluate its impact on productivity improvement over a period of time. Throughout this process, the returnee played a pivotal role in brokering the relationship between the local actors and the Japanese experts. He also mobilized support among the local firms and obtained high-level government endorsement for the project. The apparent success of the pilot project eventually led the Ethiopian government to set up a Kaizen institute - a promissory organization - within the Ministry of Industry and Trade for disseminating Japanese productivity improvement practices in Ethiopia and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Both the interview and documentary evidence (e.g. academic writing, blog posts and government reports) show the ongoing involvement of this returnee in the activities of the Institute, and his instrumental role in stimulating local demand for diffusing Kaizen practices and mobilizing support for translating his vision into action. The creation of the Kaizen Institute illustrates how the returnee's imagined futures - articulated in statements and scripts - ultimately influence decision-making and are materialized into the development of new organizations and institutions. One might argue that the construction of imagined futures constitutes a form of institutional work (Niedzialkowski 2019).

#### *The railway for national capacity building: Case 4*

This is the case of a long-serving public sector employee whose mid-career professional development in the UK and Netherlands inspired in him a strong belief in the critical importance of infrastructural capacity building as engines of economic development. During his time in Europe, he was struck by the centrality of railway systems for economic growth. Soon after returning home, he seized an opportunity to take up an appointment in the newly formed national railway corporation:

Because I realise here in this country railway we had that quite a century ago but that has declined and I have in, much enjoyed of all other things in Europe, all over Europe that the railway is most important, the life of all things, all activities, economic or even non-economy activities. So when this new idea comes I say I should be part of the history-making, this is a big opportunity.

Since then, he rose from a junior expert to a senior executive of the railway corporation. In the interview, his career narratives were intertwined with his expressed desire and vision for national capacity building: ‘I think I have assumed this one [senior executive] to make an effort just to shape what has to come’. In other words, it was a role that gave him the opportunity to realize his imagined better future for the country. He spoke of the need for knowledge transfer by learning from overseas experts and was instrumental in forging links with them to help developing the necessary skills and capabilities needed for catching-up. Ultimately, his aspired future revolved around developing the country’s railway networks:

‘In terms of capacity building we have started a big programme, aggressive programme in the railway. And this, we believe in that railway is not only transport in the Ethiopian context, it’s an engine for growth and development.’

The railway – what he saw and experienced in Europe some years ago – was a symbol of progress that drove his forward-looking and capacity-building activities back at home.

The above four cases illustrate how the returnees made their aspired futures relevant by undertaking future-making activities with the potential to shape the local context. These activities are driven by the returnees’ imagined desired futures expressed through expectations, ideas and plans about a possible better future. Their imagined futures are made real through acts of intervention in the contexts of their work and professional development, and through material connection to the locality. The start-up company and Kaizen Institute provide protected organizational spaces in which imagined futures can be articulated, negotiated and tested. The office printer and railways are ‘material things’ that participate in future-making. The findings are in line with an emerging literature that shows how abstract imaginations of the future are made real through enactment and material connections of future-making practices (Comi and Whyte 2018; Thompson 2022; Oolmen et al 2021).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

*(To be developed)*

This study has demonstrated how transnational mobility stimulates aspirational learning and provides return migrants with the knowledge about alternative possibilities and cognitive resources to aspire to a future that is different from the present. Their imagined futures serve as psychological capital in the form of self-efficacy, optimism and hope that drive the

engagement in future-making activities. Transnational mobility involves movement across space, value/cultural regimes or institutional contexts. It marks a major biographical transition and unsettling time in an individual's life. It creates 'zones of liminality' (Cangia and Zitoun 2002) and 'problematic situations' (Mead, 1934) that trigger critical reflection of the past and imaginative reconstruction of alternative future possibilities. The analysis presented in the paper highlights the dynamic interplay between mobility and imagination, and sheds light on the process through which imagined futures are activated.

The study also contributes to our understanding of how imagined alternative futures influence social action and possibilities for creative change even in highly constraining social contexts as the Ethiopian case illustrates. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that actors positioned at the intersection of multiple relational-temporal contexts and face changing situations can expand their 'practical-evaluative' and 'projective' agentic capacity. The former refers to the ability of actors to make practical judgements and choices in response to emerging demands of presently evolving situations, and the latter entails reconfiguration of received patterns of thought and action in relation to aspired futures. One might argue that the returnees' 'work of reconciliation' in future-making encompasses these two aspects of agency: engagement and alignment constitute practical-evaluative agency and imagination reveals projective agency. Much of the existing debate about the migration-development nexus has been preoccupied with return migrants' mobilization of tangible economic, human and social capital to participate in local development (See, for example, Faist, 2008; Saxenian, 2005). This study highlights the critical importance of intangible, social psychological factors that have been overlooked in the literature.

Although this study is based on a group of highly skilled returnees in Ethiopia, the findings have wider relevance for our understanding of the development potential of return migrants and offer some practical implications. Policies for reversing the brain drain in the developing countries have revolved around enticing the return of highly skilled migrants for transferring human capital in the form of advanced technical/specialist knowledge so as to induce technological innovation and business entrepreneurship. This study argues for adopting a broader policy discourse on the meaning of development to include the wider realm of benefits, notably the organisational and social psychological aspects that return migrants may bring. This is particularly important for developing countries where resources for leveraging advanced technical knowledge may be limited, but micro-level efforts to pursue desired better

futures through incremental organisational change may prove to be more generative and consequential in the long run.

Finally, it is worthy of note that the interviews were conducted with a selected sample of highly educated professionals with relatively successful careers, and the documentary evidence available online concerned success stories of returnee engagement. Thus, the data may be skewed towards portraying a highly positive experience of future-making in realizing their aspirational hopes and imagined futures.

**Table 1 Interviewee profile**

Case code (Type)	Age/ Educational qualification	Current position (at time of study)	Work experience/ position prior to going overseas	Duration of stay in host countries; type of activities
01	Early 40s; BA&MA Engineering (1986-1992; Soviet Union)	Senior energy analyst (public sector)	None (left for higher education after school)	6 years; Education/training; Soviet Union
02	60+; BSc public health (home); MA/PhD (USA)	Retired; NGO on Brain Gain	Health professional (Ministry of Health)	5 years; education/training; USA  25 years; health professional, UN
03	Early 40s BA&MBA (India)	Diaspora Officer, Ministry of Labour/Social Affairs	Government officer	6 years; education/training; India
04	Age: unknown; BA (Home); MA Energy Studies (UK); Professional training (Netherlands)	Deputy CEO, Ethiopian Railway Corporation	Government officer	3 years; education/training; UK and Netherlands
05	30s; BA (Home); MA/PhD Development Economics (Japan)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	5 years; education/training; Japan
06	60+; BA/MA Urban Planning (USA)	CEO/founder of two engineering consultancy firms	None	42 years; Education and professional work in public and private sectors; USA
07	45+; MA/PhD Anthropology; Germany; Postdoc (Germany); Diploma Journalism (UK)	Owner of private schools/colleges + other private business  President, Ethiopia Diaspora Association	None	12 years in Germany; Education/training and postdoc research
08	Early 30s; BA (Home); MA Public Finance (Japan)	Government Officer; Customs Office	Government Officer; Customs Office	1 year; education/training; Japan
09	30s; BA (Home); MA Engineering (Japan)	Company founder	Government officer	2 years; education/training; Japan (also travelled to USA for professional development)
10	50s; MA/PhD Radiology (USA)	University professor	Worked in medical field at home (10+ yrs)	13 years; education and professional work; USA
11	30s; BA (Home); MA Engineering (Germany); PhD/Post-doc (USA)	University professor	None	8 years; education/training and post-doc research; Germany and USA
12	30s; MA/PhD Economics (Denmark)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	7 years; education/training and post-doc research; Denmark
13	Age: not known BA/MA (Home); PhD Belgium	University academic	Government officer	5 years; education/training and postdoc research; Belgium

14	30s; BA (Home); MA (Denmark)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	3 years; education/training; Denmark
15	Age: late 50s BA/MA Geology (Cuba)	Government officer	Government officer	6 years; education /training; Cuba
16	50s; BA (Home); MA (Holland); PhD Geosciences (USA)	Own consultancy firm and consultancy work for government	Government officer	15 years; education and professional work; USA
17	30s; BA/MA (Home); PhD Management (USA)	University lecturer	University lecturer	3 years; education/training; USA
18	30s; MA (Home); MA Management (Netherlands)	University lecturer	University lecturer	2 years; education/training; Netherlands
19	30s; BA(Home); MA/PhD Economics (Japan)	Think tank researcher	Not known	4 years; education/training; Japan
20	30s; BA/MA (Home); PhD Economics (Netherlands); postdoc (Japan)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	5 years; education/training and postdoc research; Netherlands and Japan
21	30s; BA (Home); MA (Norway); PhD Economics (Sweden)	Think tank researcher	Think tank researcher	5 years; education/training; Norway and Sweden
22	30s; BA (Home); MA (Japan)	Government officer, then own start-up company	Government officer	1 year; education/training; Japan

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