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## **From Social to Intangible Remittances: A Conceptual Recalibration**

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## **Abstract**

Levitt's groundbreaking concept of social remittances has inspired numerous empirical studies in migration research. However, the theoretical foundations of the concept remain weak. Most fundamentally, the interpretations of what social remittances are have multiplied, leaving the concept to not much more than a catchphrase. This paper puts forward a systematic review of different conceptualisations of social remittances. It identifies four major fields in which the existing literature diverges in its interpretation of social remittances: the scope, transfer process, spatial dimension, and delineation of different subtypes of social remittances. Starting from the discussion of these ambiguities, we advance Levitt's initial concept toward what will be called *intangible remittances*. In contrast to earlier conceptualisations, we account for the multidimensionality of the concept and provide essential clarifications in delimitation and terminology. In addition, we put forward a fine-grained typology of different subtypes of intangible remittances that specifies the content (that might be economic, environmental, political, or socio-cultural) and form (knowledge, normative structures, or practices) of intangible remittances. Thereby we provide a much-needed umbrella concept that interlinks other recently developed concepts such as political remittances and smoothly blends into the superordinate concept of remittances.

## **Keywords:**

*Intangible remittances, social remittances, intangible transfers, knowledge transfer, migration*

## **Introduction**

More than 20 years ago, Peggy Levitt (1998: 927) developed the concept of social remittances, which she defined as 'the ideas, behaviours, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country'. Moving away from the narrow focus on monetary transfers, she made a groundbreaking contribution toward a more comprehensive understanding of what constitutes remittances. This not only caused a surge in empirical studies analysing the transfer of, for instance, political ideas or gender norms but also raised great hopes regarding the transformative potential of these transfers (see e.g. Kapur 2004).

Despite this enthusiasm, the research field of social remittances continues to suffer from significant gaps on the conceptual side (Boccagni and Decimo 2013; Nowicka and Šerbedžija 2016). Theoretical discussions of the concept remain surprisingly rare. Instead, the room for interpretation that Levitt's initial definition left is widely used. As a result, notions of what

social remittances stand for have multiplied (Boccagni and Decimo 2013), or, as Vari-Lavoisier (2020) puts it, social remittances have become a moving target. Therefore, there is a clear risk that social remittances become a mere catchphrase (Boccagni and Decimo 2013) or ‘a sponge that soaks up anything and everything—sufficiently different from specific financial assets—that migrants remit between the localities of destination and origin’ (Kubal 2015: 70). In addition, many closely related concepts, such as political, criminal, or technological remittances popped up in the literature lately. However, their relations to social remittances and the boundaries that delimit them remain unclear. The empirical findings lack a common and clear-cut conceptual foundation.

Against this background, the primary aims of this paper are (1) a stocktaking and discussion of existing variations in the understanding of social remittances; (2) a reconceptualisation of social remittances; and (3) a delineation of social remittances from, and integration with, other types of remittances. A structured review of existing perspectives on social remittances and closely related concepts such as political remittances is used to carve out major conceptual ambiguities that burden current social remittance research. By integrating the existing theoretical work and bridging the identified gaps, we develop the comprehensive concept of *intangible remittances*.

We go beyond earlier conceptualisations of social remittances and attempt to portray the phenomenon in its full complexity by integrating five dimensions: quality, content, form, process, and spatial dimension. We differentiate three delimitable forms (knowledge, normative structures, and practices) and four thematic sub-types of intangible remittances (economic, environmental, political, and socio-cultural) with all key terms clearly defined. Moreover, we understand the intangible remittance transfer process as an act of learning and diffusion that reflects the differences between migration origin and destination or any of their segments. Finally, we stress the direction of intangible remittances from the migration destination to the migration origin. Thereby, we set clear boundaries to the concept and ensure analytical clarity against the background of an ever-widening interpretation that has developed over the years.

### **From social to intangible remittances: ambiguities of current social remittance research**

Our literature review reveals four fields in which the concept of social remittances exhibits significant ambiguities. They concern the (1) scope and conceptual delineation, (2) the transfer process, (3) the spatial dimension, and (4) a clear systematisation of different subtypes of social remittances. We consider each of these in turn.

*A question of scope: social, non-economic, or intangible remittances?*

The first ambiguity relates to the question of what characterises social remittances and makes them distinct from other types of remittances. Is it their socio-cultural content or rather their intangibility? Or is it simply the fact that they are non-monetary? All these different interpretations can be found in the literature, as will be shown. Still, one must go back to Peggy Levitt's original paper on social remittances to understand where they stem from.

In her groundbreaking article, Levitt describes social remittances as 'cultural flows' (1998: 936) and a 'migration-driven form of cultural diffusion' (1998: 926). The acquisition of social remittances is circumscribed as adding new items to a migrant's 'cultural repertoire' (1998: 931). These remarks, combined with Levitt's choice of the term *social* remittances, might indicate that social remittances are mainly defined by their content and restricted to the socio-cultural sphere, which is understood broadly (including, for instance, also the political). In contrast, the quality of remittances, i.e., whether they are tangible or intangible, does not seem to be a decisive criterion: a passage in which Levitt (1998) describes how migrants transfer typical American clothes to the Dominican Republic gives the impression that social remittances may also be tangible.

However, in the same paper, in the sentence usually quoted as her definition of social remittances, she more broadly describes social remittances as 'the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital that flow from receiving- to sending-country' (Levitt 1998: 927). This description does not seem to include tangible assets and is largely detached from the thematic content, i.e., there is no indication that social remittances are restricted to the socio-cultural sphere. Hence, it could be interpreted as understanding social remittances as intangible transfers. This interpretation is reinforced by passages in the paper that describe the transfer of factual knowledge, such as information about economic prospects and working conditions in the receiving country, as social remittances. These assets are undeniably intangible but would not necessarily be considered socio-cultural resources. This fuzziness in Levitt's original paper gave room to four different perspectives on the scope of social remittances that differ regarding their understanding of social remittances.

The first perspective represents a narrow understanding of social remittances as cultural diffusion. This *socio-cultural perspective* defines social remittances as socio-cultural transfers and delineates them from other thematically defined types of remittances such as political, economic, technological, or criminal remittances (see, e.g. Goldring 2004; Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020; Kunz 2008; Paarlberg 2022; Rahman and Fee 2012). From this perspective, content is paramount as social remittances' critical defining characteristic. The question of their

quality, i.e., whether tangible or intangible, is usually not discussed. If anything, a reference is made to Levitt's (1998) notion that social remittances are ideas, practices, and social capital. Only Krawatzek and Müller-Funk (2020: 2) take content and quality into account, however, with an emphasis on content. The socio-cultural perspective dissents from Levitt's broader perspective by excluding, for example, the political sphere.

The second perspective, which we dub the *non-economic perspective*, likewise relates to Levitt's conception of social remittances as cultural diffusion. In contrast to the socio-cultural perspective, it primarily emphasises the non-economic content of social remittances.<sup>1</sup> Defined as the antipode to monetary remittances, social remittances are referred to as all 'non-financial transfers' (Grabowska et al. 2017: 1), 'non-financial capital' (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017: 2789), or 'the other side of financial remittances' (Suksomboon 2008: 463). Similarly, social remittances are often contrasted with economic remittances and portrayed as non-economic (Markley 2011; Montefrio et al. 2014; Reynolds 2008). Like in the socio-cultural perspective, the question of social remittances' quality is subordinate. The non-economic perspective hence, in principle, allows for social remittances to be tangible. Grabowska et al. (2017), for instance, explicitly include objects as a form of social remittances in their definition of the concept. The major distinction made by this perspective is therefore also thematic. However, as it simply distinguishes between economic and non-economic remittances, social remittances become an extremely broad concept covering basically everything except financial and economic transfers.

A third group of scholars emphasises the *intangibility* and hence the quality of social remittances. In this understanding, social remittances are neither restricted to socio-cultural transfers nor are they contrasted to economic or financial transfers. Instead, they are juxtaposed to tangible remittances (money and goods) and hence understood as intangible transfers (see Hanifi 2006; Kapur 2004; Mata-Codesal 2011; Vari-Lavoisier 2020). In this sense, Bobova (2016: 120) defines social remittances as 'all non-material assets imported by migrants to their home societies'. Levitt herself, meanwhile, endorsed this perspective when she concluded in a recent co-authored paper that the numerous different terminologies that are used throughout various disciplines, such as intangible flows, political remittances, or health transfers, 'ultimately document the different facets of one core phenomenon: that of social remittances'

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, none of Levitt's early works thematise the relation between social and monetary remittances. We can only hypothesise that it is the predominant research focus on monetary remittances before the 1990s that tempted scholars to describe social remittances as non-economic or non-financial.

(Lacroix et al. 2016: 2). The major distinction, according to this perspective, is thus not a thematic one but one that concerns the quality of the transfer.

Finally, the fourth interpretation is an *all-encompassing perspective* as it constitutes the broadest conception of social remittances we found in the literature. Nowicka and Šerbedžija (2016: v–vi), building on a suggestion by Boccagni and Decimo (2013), stress the social meaning attached to money and objects and argue that social remittances include ‘ideas, goods, money, and the values and social norms, emotions, and meanings attached to them’. According to this conception, social remittances are no longer strictly delineated from other types of remittances. Instead, all other types of remittances are incorporated into the concept of social remittances. However, Nowicka and Šerbedžija (2016) differentiate between tangible and intangible social remittances. Table 1 summarises the four perspectives on the scope of social remittances we identified in the literature.

How are these four very different perspectives on the scope of social remittances to be evaluated? To begin with, none of the four perspectives sufficiently covers all dimensions of social remittances. The purely thematic understanding of social remittances, as found in the socio-cultural and the non-economic perspectives, conflates remittances of a very different nature by largely neglecting the dimension of quality. This lack of discussion of the different characteristics of tangible and intangible remittances is problematic because they differ significantly, for instance, regarding their transfer processes. Tangible assets, such as money, are comparatively immutable assets<sup>2</sup> that are usually transferred easily and consciously (they can, e.g., simply be handed over). In contrast, intangible assets, such as business ideas, are highly volatile. Their meaning is subjective and may easily change when transferred. In addition, they cannot simply be handed over: even though a business idea can be transferred via e-mail, the recipient might not understand it the way the sender does. Moreover, intangible assets, in contrast to tangible assets, cannot be taken from us – others cannot simply ‘delete’ them from our memory. Finally, intangible assets are often transferred unconsciously.

Perspectives on social remittances that make a concise distinction between intangible and tangible remittances, such as the intangible and the all-encompassing perspective, are hence more convincing because they cover the outlined essential differences. If, however, the differentiation is made between tangible and intangible remittances without considering the dimension of content, the categorisation still remains unidimensional.

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<sup>2</sup> However, the meaning that might be attached to money and goods may not follow this logic and must be looked at separately.

Table 1: Four perspectives on the scope of social remittances

	<b>Distinctive feature of social remittances</b>	<b>Distinction from other types of remittances primarily via</b>	<b>Social remittances are delineated from...</b>	<b>Representatives in the literature</b>
<b>Socio-cultural perspective</b>	Socio-cultural content of transfers	Content	Economic, political, technological, and criminal remittances	Goldring 2004 Kunz 2008 Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020 Paarlberg 2022 Rahman and Fee 2012
<b>Non-economic perspective</b>	Non-economic or non-financial content of transfers	Content	Economic remittances	Grabowska et al. 2017 Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017 Markley 2011 Montefrio et al. 2014 Reynolds 2008 Suksomboon 2008
<b>Intangible perspective</b>	Intangibility of transfers	Quality	Tangible remittances	Bobova 2016 Hanifi 2006 Kapur 2004 Lacroix et al. 2016 Mata-Codesal 2011 Vari-Lavoisier 2020
<b>All-encompassing perspective</b>	Social remittances as umbrella term for all types of remittances	No distinction made, but quality is used to differentiate types of social remittances	No delineation made, but differentiation between tangible and intangible social remittances	Nowicka and Šerbedžija 2016

Source: Authors' compilation

Finally, despite acknowledging the importance of distinguishing between tangible and intangible remittances, the all-encompassing perspective seems of limited use in bringing more clarity into the debate: labelling almost all remittances as social remittances stands in the way of a meaningful delineation from other types of remittances.

*The process dimension of social remittances: acquisition, transmission, and impact of social remittances*

The second ambiguity surrounding the concept of social remittances concerns the social remittance transfer process. Scholars largely agree that this process involves three stages: (1) acquisition, (2) transmission, and (3) impact (Grabowska et al. 2017; Levitt 1998). In this context, it is primarily the question of when and how an idea or practice becomes a social

remittance that remains unclear. First and foremost, Karolak (2016) and Grabowska et al. (2017) note that as long as social remittances are not transferred, they are only *potential* social remittances. The main disagreement is whether any idea or practice transferred by migrants qualifies as a social remittance or whether migrants need to acquire new ideas or practices while abroad. Whereas most studies on social remittances assume this and speak of the acquisition and transfer of social remittances (e.g. Diabate and Mesplé-Somps 2019; Nowicka and Šerbedžija 2016; Pérez-Armendáriz and Crow 2010), others apply a broader definition. Tabar (2014), in his work on political remittances, defines every form of migrants' political influence on their country of origin as political remittances. He explicitly emphasises that what makes his concept distinct is that migrants do not need to acquire new ideas or practices in order to remit. Others like Lafleur and Lizin (2016) and Paarlberg (2022) seem to share this broad understanding.

Moreover, even if scholars agree that the social remittance transfer process involves the acquisition of ideas or practices, there is no consensus on what qualifies these as social remittances. In her original paper, Levitt (1998: 926) describes social remittances as a 'form of cultural diffusion'. She thereby essentially depicts social remitting as an act of acquiring and transferring assets that reflect characteristics of the migration destination. White (2016), in contrast, discusses social remittance transfer as every form of transfer embodying migration-induced change. In her understanding, social remittances do not necessarily reflect the characteristics of the migration destination but could also arise from personal circumstances of the migrant's sojourn unrelated to the migration destination (e.g., a coming-of-age experience). As such, social remitting is not automatically a process of cultural diffusion directly linked to the destination country's culture, as initially defined by Levitt (1998). This question is usually not explicitly addressed in the literature we reviewed. But, if social remittances are defined as all 'non-financial assets acquired as a result of migration' (Grabowska et al. 2017: 12) or 'all non-material assets imported by migrants to their home societies' (Bobova 2016: 120) and no further limitations are made, this seems to imply a broad understanding as found in White (2016).

Regarding the first aspect, we believe that Tabar's (2014) understanding of social remittances goes against the aforementioned widespread perspective that they are *acquired* and hence involve a learning process migrants undergo while abroad. Widening the concept the way Tabar (2014) suggests bears the danger of making social remittances indistinguishable from other important phenomena such as diaspora politics.



The second question of whether social remittances must carry characteristics of the migration destination is more complicated to resolve. The changes migrants might experience during their sojourn are manifold and not exclusively related to adopting aspects characteristic of the migration destination. So, what qualifies them as social remittances? Let us consider an example of a female student who, during her exchange semester, lives outside the parental household for the first time. She is empowered by the experience of enjoying more freedom in her daily life without having acquired features of her host country, such as progressive gender norms. If she now encourages female friends at home to lead more independent lives, is she transferring social remittances? While White (2016) would answer in the affirmative, this is not congruent with Levitt's (1998) understanding of social remittances as a form of cultural diffusion, which presupposes the acquisition of assets characteristic of the migration destination – in this case, gender norms. In reality, both processes will usually happen in parallel. On the conceptual level, however, they should be distinguished as they follow different patterns and are determined by different factors. While the acquisition of characteristics of the migration destination depends heavily on the degree of interaction with the destination society, this is irrelevant for adopting assets unrelated to the migration destination. For analytical clarity, the source of acquisition should therefore be considered.

Concerning the acquisition of social remittances, scholars agree that migrants do not blindly take over all unfamiliar ideas they are confronted with but rather pick and choose selectively what seems beneficial to them. This, of course, includes the option of non-acquisition (Grabowska et al. 2017; Levitt 1998; Suksomboon 2008). In the case of acquisition, the newly acquired ideas and practices are often combined with existing ones (Levitt 1998). Nowicka and Šerbedžija (2016: 3) speak of social remittances as 'mutable mobiles' that 'transform while being transferred'. The transmission can occur consciously or unconsciously as not all migrants are aware of the changes they underwent, and not all transfer social remittances intentionally (Grabowska et al. 2017; Suksomboon 2008). Channels through which social remittances are transferred include phone calls, e-mails, blog posts, letters, or face-to-face communication when migrants visit their families or return to their countries of origin (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011).

Concerning the transmission of social remittances, scholars disagree on *who* might be a potential remittance sender. Levitt (1998) initially very narrowly restricted this to the group of migrants themselves. Krawatzek and Müller-Funk (2020) include migrants, their descendants, and non-migrants at the places of origin as senders of remittances. This wider understanding is shared by all those who agree that social remittances *circulate* instead of being sent only from

destination to origin country. In more recent papers (e.g. Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011, 2013), Levitt moreover brings up the idea of collective social remittances, which ‘are exchanged between individuals in their roles as organizational actors’ e.g., within hometown associations (Boccagni et al. 2016: 447). Whereas these conceptualisations still understand social remittance transfer as an act initiated by individual migrants, Paarlberg (2022) also sees states as possible senders of what he calls criminal remittances.

On this point, a narrow understanding of social remittance transfer as a process driven by individual migrants seems most appropriate. This complies with Levitt's (1998) original conception of social remittance transfer as a process of migration-induced acquisition and transfer of novel ideas or practices characteristic of the migration destination. As migration is a prerequisite for social remittances transfer, such a conception does not only exclude non-migrants but also states as senders of social remittances. If states were included as remittance senders, what counts as remittance would need to be extremely widened: for instance, development aid would have to be understood as (monetary) remittances as well.

The third phase marks the impact of social remittances. Grabowska et al. (2017) broadly distinguish two possible outcomes: resistance and reception by the local population. Although often researched from the perspective of the migration-development nexus, scholars emphasise that the impact of social remittances as social remittances themselves are neither positive nor negative (Levitt 1998; Rother 2016). Notwithstanding the importance of how remittances unfold, this aspect is less relevant for the conceptualisation and will not be further discussed here.

#### *The spatial dimension of social remittances: unidirectional or circulating?*

A third ambiguity in the conceptualisation of social remittances concerns their spatial dimension. Levitt (1998: 927) initially wrote that social remittances ‘flow from receiving- to sending-country’, which was criticised early on for being one-sided. Reacting to this critique, Levitt later acknowledged that social remittances circulate between origin and destination country instead of flowing only in one direction (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). Today, scholars largely agree on this broader understanding. In a recent paper, Krawatzek and Müller-Funk (2020) go one step further, suggesting that transfers within countries, e.g. from urban to rural areas, should also be included in the concept.

Doubtlessly, migrants not only transfer assets from the migration destination to their place of origin but also bring along their culture, knowledge, financial resources, and much more. These contributions profoundly and lastingly shape the destination countries, as

substantiated by a wide range of analyses (e.g. D'Rozario and Choudhury 2003; Foner et al. 2014).

While it is evident that migration-induced flows of tangible and intangible assets circulate globally and multi-directionally, it is less clear if these circulating flows should all be subsumed under social remittances. To begin with, including transfers from migration origin to migration destination contradicts the very meaning of the word remittance, which stems from the Latin *remittere*, meaning *to send back*. Despite the criticism of the one-directional view, there is almost no research applying a social remittance perspective analysing transfers from migration origin to migration destination.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, there is a fundamental difference between these two types of transfers that should not be ignored: even though their outcomes might be the same (for instance, cultural change), the underlying processes are not. The transfer of assets from the migration destination to migrants' places of origin entails the *acquisition* of new resources at the migration destination and their *subsequent transfer* to the areas of origin, which might eventually lead to changes at the migration origin. In contrast, transferring assets from migration origin to migration destination is, first of all, a process of *bringing* resources to the migration destination. The acquisition of new resources by the migrants is not involved. Hence, both processes should be analysed separately.

Krawatzek and Müller-Funk's (2020) suggestion to understand social remittances as flows between and *within* states, in contrast, is reasonable and fits very well with the literature on monetary remittances that, for a long time now, covers both international and internal remittances (Stark 1980; Stark et al. 1986). Without a doubt, life in different regions within one country can differ enormously, which lays the basis for social remittance transfer. In some extreme cases, countries might be so large and ethnically diverse that internal migrants face even more significant differences within the same country than international migrants do in a foreign country (King and Skeldon 2010). The same applies to rural and urban areas. Hence there seems no reason to exclude the transmission of assets within countries from the social remittance concept, especially as the scale of internal migration is a multiple of international migration.

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<sup>3</sup> We do not disregard a smaller body of literature on so-called reverse remittances (see, e.g. Mobernd 2012). However, reverse remittances are not only strongly focused on monetary flows, but the term describes the phenomenon of *reverse* flows contrasting them from the expected regular remittance flow.

### *Subtypes of social remittances: toward a new typology*

Social remittances can appear in a whole range of different forms and thematic areas. Examples range from specific knowledge, e.g. on agricultural production techniques (Montefrio et al. 2014), political beliefs (Chauvet and Mercier 2014) and driving habits (Grabowska et al. 2017), to notions of healthcare provision (Levitt and Rajaram 2013) and development ideologies (Agarwala 2016). Yet attempts to systematise the different subtypes of social remittances are scarce and often presented as crude listings rather than well-grounded typologies. Another ambiguity, therefore, concerns the systematisation of different subtypes of social remittances.

In line with the reviewed literature on social and related types of remittances, there are two predominant starting points to systematise social remittances: their form, i.e. how they materialise, and their content. Very few systematise social remittances along their content (see, e.g. Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017).<sup>4</sup> Much more common is the differentiation of forms of social remittances. The most widely used distinctions of forms of social remittances again go back to Levitt (Levitt 1998, 2001; Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011). In her earlier works, she claims that there are three forms of social remittances: normative structures, systems of practice, and social capital (Levitt 1998, 2001). Normative structures, according to her, are the ideas, values and beliefs that migrants transfer, while systems of practice denote the ‘actions shaped by normative structures’ (Levitt 1998: 934). Social capital is less clearly defined but seems to be understood in line with Bourdieu (1983) as the prestige a person draws from being a member of a specific group.

This threefold division is, however, somewhat contradicted by passages in the same papers in which Levitt replaces normative structures by ideas or adds identities as a form of social remittances. Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2011: 3) subsequently argued that there are four forms of social remittances: ‘norms, practices, identities and social capital’. In two papers from 2013, normative structures, social capital, and identities do not appear anymore as forms of social remittances, but know-how is added, leading to a differentiation between ‘ideas, practices, and know-how’ (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2013: 20; Levitt and Rajaram 2013: 339). In the two most recent papers Levitt co-authored, her understanding eventually broadens significantly. In Boccagni et al. (2016), social remittances are described as values, behaviours, skills, organisational forms, and know-how. In Lacroix et al. (2016), practices, skills, norms,

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<sup>4</sup> Some scholars such as Goldring (2004) also use content to systematise different types of remittances. However, in contrast to Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou (2017), they do not understand political and other types of remittances as subtypes of social remittances but as independent types of remittances equivalent (not subordinate) to social remittances.

ideas, identities, and social capital are recognised as forms of social remittances. In contrast to Levitt's early works, these forms are unfortunately not defined. Due to these shifts and blurs in Levitt's conception, scholars use very different sets of social remittance forms, as summarised in Table 2 and discussed in the following.

Sticking closely to Levitt and Lamba-Nieves (2013), Vari-Lavoisier (2020: 125) divides social remittances into 'knowledge and know-how, ideas and practices'. Unfortunately, she does not provide clear definitions of these terms. Grabowska et al. (2017) base their considerations on the famous diffusion theory of Rogers (2003), claiming that the social remittance transfer process resembles the diffusion of an innovation. Using Rogers' categorisation of innovations, they differentiate between ideas, defined as 'node[s] of conceptual thoughts'; practices, understood as 'style[s] of acting'; and objects, defined as 'material item[s] which can gain social meaning' (Grabowska et al. 2017: 21–22). They prefer these three forms to those used by Levitt (1998) not only because they believe them to be easier to operationalise but also because they are convinced that normative constructs and social capital are only formed at a later stage based on the ideas that are transferred. Nowicka and Šerbedžija (2016) finally differentiate ideas, goods, and money as forms of social remittances.

Similar forms are suggested in the closely related field of political remittances. Goldring (2004: 805), for instance, defines political remittances as 'political identities, demands, and practices' whereas Krawatzek and Müller-Funk (2020) conceptualise them as principles, vocabulary, and practices. Political principles are defined as political norms, ideas, and perceptions, political vocabulary as 'political terms, symbols and slogans', and political practices as 'knowledge about patterns of civil and political participation' (Krawatzek and Müller-Funk 2020: 8).

Ivlevs (2021: 48) differentiates the migration-driven diffusion of 'pro-environmental awareness, values and, ultimately, behaviour' in his study on the impact of emigration on pro-environmental behaviour in origin countries. The term awareness is in some parts replaced by knowledge or informedness. The term value is used interchangeably with the terms norm and belief, pointing to the normative character Ivlevs ascribes to this form. Finally, Paarlberg (2022) includes criminal activities, norms, and identities in his concept of criminal remittances.

Table 2: Forms of social and related types of remittances suggested in the literature

	Practices	Normative Structures	Ideas	Knowledge	Identities	Social Capital	Other
Levitt (1998)	✓ (Also, behaviours)	✓	[✓]	-	[✓]	✓	-
Levitt (2001)	✓ (Also, behaviours)	✓	[✓]	-	-	✓	-
Levitt & Lamba-Nieves (2011)	✓	(Norms)	-	-	✓	✓	-
Levitt & Lamba-Nieves (2013)	✓	-	✓	✓ (Know-how)	-	-	-
Levitt & Rajaram (2013)	✓	-	✓	✓ (Know-how)	-	-	-
Boccagni, Lafleur & Levitt (2016)	✓ (Also, behaviours and skills)	✓ (Values)	✓	✓ (Know-how and also organisational forms)	-	-	-
Lacroix, Levitt & Vari-Lavoisier (2016)	✓ (Also, skills)	✓ (Norms)	✓	-	✓	✓	-
Vari-Lavoisier (2020)	✓	-	✓	✓ (Also, know-how)	-	-	-
Grabowska et al. (2017)	✓	-	✓	-	-	-	Objects
Nowicka & Šerbedžija (2016)	-	-	✓	-	-	-	Goods and money
Goldring (2004)	✓	✓ (Demands)	-	-	✓	-	-
Krawatzek & Müller-Funk (2019)	✓	✓ (Principles)	-	✓ (Vocabulary)	-	-	-
Ivlevs (2021)	✓	✓ (Values, norms, beliefs)	-	✓ (Also, awareness, informedness)	-	-	-
Paarlberg (2022)	✓ (Activities)	✓ (Norms)	-	-	✓	-	-

Source: Authors' compilation

Note: As Levitt (1998) and (2001) refers to additional forms not covered by the threefold typology of social remittances that includes normative structures, systems of practice, and social capital, we denoted these other forms in square brackets in the table. In the interest of clarity, the terms used in the literature are ascribed to superordinate forms if possible. The term norm, for instance, is assigned to the superordinate form of normative structures and the term know-how to knowledge. Terms that could not be easily assigned to a superordinate form can be found under Other.

Several aspects stand out from the summary of previous typifications. First and foremost, it is evident that the typologies developed over time vary in many aspects. Overall, we identified around 20 terms used in the literature to describe different forms of social and related types of remittances. This mirrors how the initial idea of social remittances has unravelled. When we cluster the various terms as in Table 2, six forms remain that were mentioned more than twice. Out of the six, four appear more frequently, so there seems to be a consensus about their importance. These four most relevant forms are (1) practices, (2) normative structures, (3) ideas, and (4) knowledge. While practices are mentioned 13 times, normative structures and ideas appear nine, and knowledge six times in the papers we reviewed. These four core forms constitute the starting point of the following discussion on how social remittances can best be typified.

To begin with, we would like to draw attention to the fundamental distinction between two primary forms of intangible assets that evolve around individuals' actions (practices) and thoughts (ideas). All forms of social remittances can be traced back to these two broad categories, which essentially cover the intangible heritage of a community. Practices are the traditions, customs, and habits of a community, such as specific habits of eating or dressing. Ideas subsume, among other things, specific community norms, e.g. regarding appropriate social behaviour, as well as knowledge, for example, on economic processes. Ideas can hence be understood as an umbrella term for knowledge and normative structures.

Normative structures were brought into the discussion by Levitt (1998, 2001), but similar forms denoting normative constructs are present in several other publications in the social remittance literature. They describe *what ought to be* and are an umbrella term for certain normative, subjective intangible assets such as values, beliefs, norms, or principles.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, knowledge appears mainly in more recent social remittance publications, as evident from Table 2. Compared to the judgmental normative structures, knowledge is objective and fact-based and describes *what is*. It is usually understood as justified true belief and includes know-how, which can be seen as a specific form of knowledge referring to technical and procedural knowledge. Vocabulary, a term suggested by Krawatzek and Müller-Funk (2020), and organisational forms, as mentioned by Boccagni et al. (2016), could also be subsumed under knowledge.

While ideas seem to be an accepted, rather broad superordinate form to normative structures and knowledge, the question remains whether the more narrowly defined subtypes

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<sup>5</sup> In her early writings, Levitt (1998, 2001) subsumes ideas under normative structures. In contrast to this, we understand ideas as superordinate to normative constructs, as outlined above.

are the better choice for conceptualisation. As evident from Table 2, many authors prefer a distinction between normative structures and knowledge. This is in line with the literature, which points out that normative structures and knowledge differ substantially regarding their transfer processes: a central finding of acculturation research is that values and attitudes are particularly resistant to change as they question deeply rooted parts of a person's identity (Berry 2017; Schwartz et al. 2015; Ward et al. 2001). Similarly, Levitt (1998) notes that values and norms (the main forms of normative structures) are harder to transfer than knowledge. Therefore, we suggest sticking to the two distinct forms of normative structures and knowledge, while the term idea remains valid as a superordinate but rather fuzzy notion of the two.

The remaining forms discussed in the following are identity, social capital, objects, and money. *Identity* appears five times in the literature we reviewed. In psychology, identity is defined as 'the totality of one's self-construal' (Weinreich and Saunderson 2003: 26). The term is hence a highly complex and subjective construct describing who we think we are regarding a myriad of factors such as gender, ethnicity, occupation, etc. It is a product of relatively stable biological factors and the experiences we make during our life (Weinreich and Saunderson 2003). In this sense, identity can undoubtedly change during a stay abroad. However, we would argue that identity, as a composite construct which is inherently linked to a person, rather changes as a consequence of the acquisition of social remittances instead of being a form of social remittances.

Social capital is furthermore mentioned four times in the conceptualisations we reviewed. To begin with, the term is problematic as it is fuzzy, and researchers have defined it very differently. More importantly, as Nowicka and Šerbedžija (2016) argue, social capital does not blend smoothly with Levitt's other forms of social remittances. Whereas normative structures, practices, and knowledge can be acquired, owned (it cannot be taken from us once we acquired it), and transferred to others, social capital is an asset that continues to depend on others. If they cease to exist or decide to refuse contact or recognition, social capital is lost. Finally, one may argue that social remittance acquisition facilitates the formation of social capital instead of being a form of social remittances (Boccagni and Decimo 2013; Grabowska et al. 2017). Similarly, social capital could facilitate (or impede) the acquisition of social remittances. Conflating social capital with social remittances would make it impossible to analyse the complex ways through which the two are interlinked.

Grabowska et al. (2017), as well as Nowicka and Šerbedžija (2016), finally include objects/goods as a form of social remittances. As outlined earlier and supported by Levitt's current understanding of social remittances (Lacroix et al. 2016), we call for a clear separation



of tangible and intangible remittances which goes against an inclusion of objects/goods as forms of social remittances. The same applies to money, as used by Nowicka and Šerbedžija (2016).

### **An enhanced concept of (intangible) remittances**

The previous section illustrated that the literature on social remittances exhibits significant conceptual ambiguities. We carved out the major cornerstones of a clear understanding of social remittances. Based on this, this section will firstly bring together the different components and suggest an enhanced concept of what we will call intangible remittances. This includes a new definition of the concept and its key components, as well as a new typology. Subsequently, this enhanced concept of intangible remittances will be integrated into the overarching concept of remittances.

#### *Recalibrating social remittances: toward a comprehensive concept and typology of intangible remittances*

Our concept of intangible remittances is defined along five dimensions: quality, process, spatial dimension, form, and content. To start with, the focus of the concept should not be primarily on the socio-cultural content of transfers, but rather on their quality. In line with this, a fundamental distinction should be made between intangible and tangible remittances. This is not only most convincing in terms of consistency but also in line with Levitt's most recent publications in which she has turned the attention toward the intangibility of social remittances. To create a consistent typology and avoid confusion about the term *social* remittances, we suggest speaking of *intangible* remittances. Intangible assets are defined as immaterial, meaning impossible to touch, describe exactly, or give an exact value (Cambridge Dictionary 2022). In contrast, tangible assets exist physically or materially (Cambridge Dictionary 2022) and therefore include monetary and in-kind remittances.

To ensure analytical clarity and stop the trend of an ever-widening concept, we further suggest not including all intangible migration-induced transfers into the concept of intangible remittances. Therefore, we understand the intangible remittance transfer process as an act driven by individual migrants and as the product of an acquisition process. To pay tribute to Levitt's initial notion of social remittances as cultural diffusion, we insist that intangible remittances need to reflect characteristics of the migration destination or any of its segments as perceived by the migrant. The acquisition of assets unrelated to the migration destination is a different process shaped by other factors. Including these transfers would risk overstressing the concept and making it arbitrary. This excludes, for instance diaspora politics or the

transmission of intangible assets arising solely from personal experiences unrelated to the migration destination. Moreover, we would like to note that the lessons of segmented assimilation theory are essential: migrants do not integrate into the totality of the destination society as such but into different segments of it (Portes and Zhou 1993). The potential intangible remittances migrants adopt and transfer depend strongly on the segment of society that they mainly interact with. Concerning the spatial dimension of intangible remittances, we propose a narrow understanding that excludes transfers flowing from migration origin to migration destination as these follow different processes and should hence be analysed separately. We consciously speak of migration destination and origin instead of destination and origin country to take account of remittances induced by internal migration.

In line with earlier works (Levitt 1998; Rother 2016), we would like to emphasise that intangible remittances are, of course, neither positive nor negative but essentially value-neutral. Their nature is volatile – their meaning can change easily. They are often merged with existing ideas or practices and adapted to the local context (Levitt 1998). All stages of the transfer process (acquisition, transmission, and impact) can happen as an act of conscious agency but also unconsciously (Suksomboon 2008).

Having delineated what intangible remittances comprise, we now proceed with our typology of intangible remittances. It differentiates subtypes of intangible remittances along two dimensions: form and content. This results in a fine-grained set of subtypes, as illustrated in Table 3. Following the arguments set out earlier, we first differentiate three forms of intangible remittances: knowledge, normative structures, and practices. To ensure coherence and analytical clarity, we, in contrast to Levitt and other conceptions, exclude identity and social capital. We keep the simple but fundamental distinction between passing on ideas and practices and further differentiate ideas into the forms of knowledge and normative structures.

Knowledge usually refers to what is known or to a justified true belief. Remittances passed on as ideas in the form of knowledge are therefore usually objective, non-judgmental, and refer to the question of *what is*. Normative structures are judgmental concepts referring to the question of *what ought to be* (see Levitt 1998). Remittances in the form of normative structures thus correspond to subjective perceptions and expectations and include, among other things, values, beliefs, and norms.<sup>6</sup> Under practices, we understand all transferred patterns of behaviour, such as habits of eating or dressing, patterns of political participation, or religious

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<sup>6</sup> The terms norms and normative structures are not synonyms. Whereas norms are prevailing codes of conduct regarding the behaviour of the members of a certain group (Lapinski and Rimal (2005), normative structures refer to a broader concept and include e.g. values, attitudes, beliefs and other forms of normative, subjective understandings and expectations.

practices. While some practices, such as eating and dressing habits, might be easily transferred, others that involve changes in patterns learned over a long time might need more time and effort to transfer (Berry 2017).

While emphasising the intangibility of what Levitt called social remittances, we certainly do not overlook their content-related dimension, which is the second dimension of the typology. Inspired by Krawatzek and Müller-Funk (2020), Goldring (2004), and others, we suggest differentiating between economic, political, and socio-cultural intangible remittances. In contrast, we do not understand these to be independent types of remittances but subtypes of intangible remittances. Recent research reveals that migrants also transfer knowledge, normative structures, and practices concerning the environment, such as recycling (Ivlevs 2021; Montefrio et al. 2014; Grabowska et al. 2017). Therefore, we add intangible environmental remittances to the typology. We decided, however, to refrain from including technological remittances, which were introduced by Nichols (2002). Technological remittances are described as the skills and knowledge transferred through migration, which led us to believe that this is not a content-related subtype of intangible remittances but subsumed under knowledge and practices. Civic and conflict remittances, as brought up by Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou (2017), and criminal remittances, as introduced by Paarlberg (2022), might – depending on the context – be best subsumed under intangible political or socio-cultural remittances.

We define the terms economic, environmental, political, and socio-cultural in line with the Cambridge Dictionary (2022). Economic relates to aspects concerned with trade, industry, or money; environmental relates to the environment in which people, animals, and plants live; political relates to the activities of the government, members of law-making organisations, or people who try to influence the way a country is governed; socio-cultural relates to different groups of people in society and their habits, traditions, and beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We hence use a narrow understanding of the socio-cultural sphere, excluding the political.

Table 3: A typology of intangible remittances with examples

		Content-Related Subtypes				
		Economic	Environmental	Political	Socio-cultural	
		<i>Relate to trade, industry, or money</i>	<i>Relate to the environment in which people, animals, and plants live</i>	<i>Relate to the activities of the government, members of law-making organisations, or people who try to influence the way a country is governed</i>	<i>Relate to different groups of people in society and their habits, traditions, and beliefs</i>	
Form-Related Subtypes	Knowledge	<i>Relates to what is</i>	Knowledge of economic or financial systems; Technological knowledge; Business ideas	Knowledge of energy efficiency or animal welfare measures	Knowledge of political systems or the organisation of an election	Knowledge of cultural or religious guidelines, e.g., on gender roles
	Normative structures	<i>Relate to what ought to be</i>	Attitudes on economic or financial systems; Working attitudes; Attitudes on business ideas	Attitudes on environment or animal protection	Political attitudes, e.g., toward political systems or electoral systems	Religious beliefs; Attitudes on gender roles or family life
	Practices	<i>Relate to patterns of behaviour</i>	Working practices; Investment behaviour; Entrepreneurial behaviour	Recycling; Usage of energy-saving lamps; Veganism	Patterns of political participation, e.g. protest forms or voting behaviour	Religious habits; Gender-specific school attendance; Dressing habits

Source: Authors' compilation

Although we believe that distinguishing between tangible and intangible remittances provides many advantages, it must be kept in mind that, in practice, both are closely interlinked. A migrant might, for instance, combine monetary remittances for helping relatives set up a business at home with advice on conducting that business based on knowledge she gained abroad. Tangible and intangible remittances thus often go hand-in-hand with each other, reinforce each other or work as an implicit vehicle of each other. The same applies to their subtypes: the boundaries between them will not always be clear-cut, and scholars might be confronted with hybrids in some cases. Working attitudes, for instance, might, depending on the research perspective, equally be categorised as intangible socio-cultural or as intangible economic remittances. Hence, for every research question, it is necessary to thoroughly reflect on the perspective from which the research object is analysed.

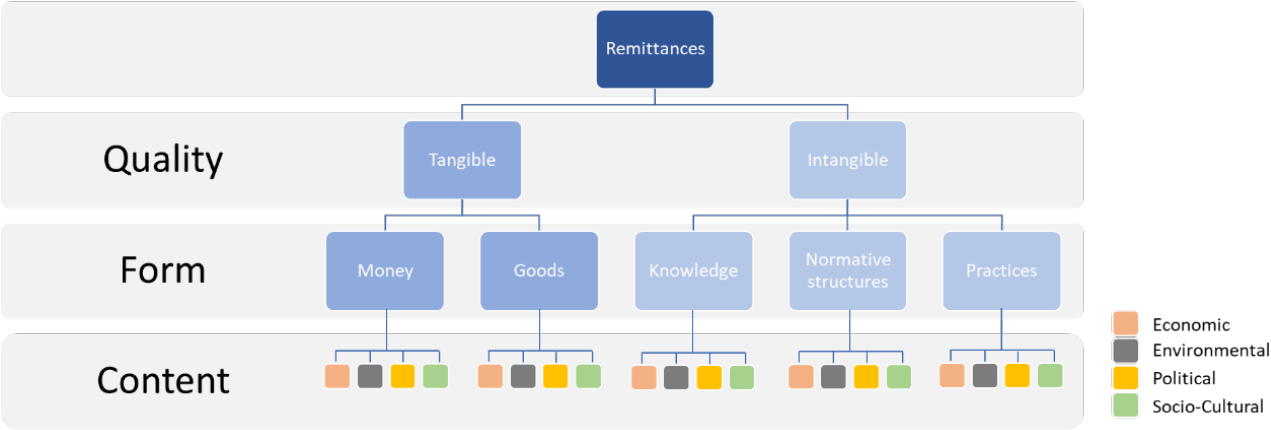
#### *An integrated (intangible) remittance framework*

With this approach to intangible remittances set, we finally integrate it into an encompassing conception of remittances. Remittances are still usually understood as monetary remittances, while other types of remittances play a minor role. We offer a conception of remittances that equally considers tangible and intangible remittances. In line with our understanding of intangible remittances, we suggest subdividing tangible remittances into the same thematic subtypes. Examples could be country-specific clothes and food (tangible socio-cultural remittances) or a solar collector (tangible environmental remittances). In line with the preceding thoughts, we suggest the following definitions:

- *Remittances* are the sum of tangible and intangible assets migrants acquire at their migration destination and transfer to their migration origin. They can carry economic, environmental, political, or socio-cultural content.
- *Tangible remittances* comprise transferred money and goods, while *intangible remittances* are the knowledge, normative structures and practices migrants acquire at the migration destination and transfer to their migration origin. Intangible remittances reflect the (perceived) differences between the core characteristics of the migration destination and the migration origin or any of their segments.

The resulting overarching conception of remittances with tangible and intangible remittances as key types is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: An enhanced concept of remittances



Source: Authors' illustration

**Conclusion**

Levitt’s groundbreaking ideas on social remittances have inspired a whole generation of researchers. However, over time, it became evident that her initial concept left significant room for interpretation, which is why today, a plethora of different understandings of social remittances circulate. In addition, the research field has lately witnessed a surge in related concepts, such as political or civic remittances, which are sometimes understood as subtypes of social remittances, and sometimes as independent types of remittances. As outlined in this paper, these developments bear the threat that the concept of social remittances becomes a mere catchphrase (Boccagni and Decimo 2013), more and more losing its analytical clarity. The principal aims of this paper were therefore to provide an overview and discussion of existing interpretations of social remittances, put forward an enhanced version of the concept, and delineate it from and integrate it with other types of remittances.

A review of the different conceptualisations of social remittances was the starting point of this paper. We showed that none of the examined conceptualisations sufficiently covers all crucial theoretical aspects. Either they fail to depict the multi-dimensionality of the concept, work with an incoherent or weakly defined set of subtypes or do not delineate social remittances from other migration-induced transfers. We identified four fields in which the existing conceptualisations diverge significantly: the scope, transfer process, spatial dimension, and subtypes of social remittances. Our paper discussed these ambiguities and moved forward by suggesting an enhanced concept.

Reflecting on the existing literature, we concluded that the key feature that defines social remittances is their intangibility. While we believe that Levitt’s terminology of social

remittances refers to their formation in a different socio-cultural setting, many authors interpreted it regarding the content of these transfers. To avoid further confusion linked to the term *social remittances*, we suggested re-labelling them *intangible remittances*. We furthermore proposed to sharpen the concept by a clear delimitation of what falls under intangible migration-induced transfers. Transfers termed intangible remittances should flow from migration destination to migration origin (but not the other way round) and result from differences between the two locations which may also be within one country. We depict intangible remittance transfer as an act activated by individual migrants. Finally, a clear-cut, two-dimensional classification of intangible remittances according to their form (knowledge, normative structures, and practices) and their content (economic, environmental, political, and socio-cultural) captures and demarcates the core facets of intangible remittances.

Instead of re-inventing Levitt's concept, we re-calibrated it as a well-defined common ground for future research. We depict the phenomenon in its full complexity and establish a common foundation for the many sub-concepts, such as political remittances, that have come up lately. We integrate the concept with traditional (tangible) remittances to emphasise the equal rank of tangible and intangible remittances but simultaneously delimit it from other migration-induced transfers. By providing clear definitions, we furthermore improve operationalisability. In this way, our concept provides a much-needed tool for analysing intangible remittances in a more systematic and comparable way. We believe this is essential in advancing this relatively young research field.

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