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Reference:
Winters Nanneke.- Embedding remittances : a methodological note on financial diaries in Nicaragua
Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie - ISSN 0040-747X - 108:2(2017), p. 175-189
Full text (Publisher's DOI): https://doi.org/10.1111/TESG.12204
To cite this reference: http://hdl.handle.net/10067/1351100151162165141

EMBEDDING REMITTANCES: A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE ON FINANCIAL DIARIES IN NICARAGUA

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Received: April 2015; accepted March 2016

ABSTRACT
In response to the methodological challenge of embedding remittances to counter dominant development discourses, this paper aims to contribute to remittances research by discussing financial diaries in Muy Muy, Nicaragua. Based on longitudinal and integrated quantitative and qualitative tracking of migrant household practices, financial diaries facilitate explorations of the social and contextual dimensions of remittances that may help account for their heterogeneous character. In particular, the paper highlights the partiality of diaries as well as the translocal interdependency and irregularity of household practices, providing clues for integrating remittances instead of isolating them as neutral instrumental transfers. It uses the example of household debt to further anchor remittances locally, illustrating how financial diaries can expose the changes and considerations that are part of household practices, including remittances. The paper concludes by suggesting that financial diaries need a decisively qualitative framework and may be particularly useful in contexts characterised by multiple migrations.

Key words: remittances, financial diaries, translocal households, debt and migration, longitudinal research methodology, Nicaragua

INTRODUCTION

The private money that migrants send to their families continues to be the subject of public scrutiny and debate. Dominant policy and scholarly discourses that display an optimistic belief in remittances[1] as relatively straightforward monetary vehicles for development tend to ignore their actual heterogeneity (Kunz 2008; De Haas 2010). These discourses are increasingly challenged by translocal and ethnographic approaches that highlight remittances' social and contextual dimensions (Carling 2014) or 'embeddedness' (Granovetter 1985). Such approaches go beyond remittances as neutral, detached, and largely instrumental transfers. They look into the heterogeneous character of remittances by exploring how they shape and are shaped by social relationships, and how they are mediated through local structures and dynamics.[2]

Remittances' social and contextual dimensions include asymmetrical relations of support and obligation, for example those based on gender norms and practices (Lawson 2000; Wong 2006; Åkesson 2011). Social and contextual dimensions also include other asymmetrical relations (like ethnicity or class), as well as livelihood strategies and available infrastructures that 'anchor' migration and remittances locally (Conway & Cohen 2003). These dimensions influence and differentiate migrants' options and obstacles for generating remittances, the considerations that are part of their transfer, and their use and implications across settings. In order to unravel remittances' heterogeneous character, meticulous empirical knowledge of these dimensions is crucial (Lo 2008).

This paper responds to recent calls for reflection on the methodological challenges of generating empirical knowledge for socially and contextually embedding remittances (Long 2008; Rahman & Fee 2012) by using the innovative financial diaries method (Collins *et al.* 2009). Given the need for remittances research to combine quantitative and qualitative techniques over an extended period of time (Mazzucato 2008; Rahman & Fee 2012), the paper considers the ways in which household financial diaries may be an appropriate method for addressing this need. As I will explain in further detail below, financial diaries systematically and longitudinally track household practices regarding income, expenditure, loans and savings, as well as the perspectives, opportunities and challenges surrounding these practices. This incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative techniques facilitates tracking changes in practices, for example, those regarding remittances, as well as tracking the considerations behind these changes. Moreover, financial diaries record these changes and considerations as part of households' locally anchored, broader constellation of practices. Monetary details offer topics of conversation for a further exploration of the integrated character and larger social fabric of these practices.

Guided by information from other financial diaries studies, the paper analyses financial diaries created with 16 migrant households in the central Nicaraguan village of Muy Muy between October 2010 and September 2011. The aim of the paper is twofold: first, to provide a detailed reflection on the financial diaries method as a tool for exploring social and contextual dimensions of remittances, and second, to use this reflection to further substantiate how these dimensions shape remittances' heterogeneity. The Nicaraguan case for supporting these aims provides an appropriate setting for creating financial diaries. Muy Muy is characterised by highly unequal and unstable livelihood opportunities as well as limited access to basic financial, health and education services. These dynamics contribute to flexible, informal, and cross-border household practices for survival and well-being, which were the focus of intermittent multi-sited ethnographic research on migration and local development between 2009 and 2014 (Steel *et al.* 2011; Winters 2014). Financial diaries were created to facilitate tracking these dynamic household practices, including remittances.

By analysing financial diaries in Muy Muy, the paper intends to contribute to remittances research in methodological as well as theoretical terms. Methodologically, it does so by detailing the pitfalls and potential of the financial diaries method, thereby addressing the need for longitudinal and mixed quantitative/qualitative remittances research, and providing useful input for future remittances and diary studies. In particular, the paper shows that the ability of financial diaries to track practices only makes sense as part of broader qualitative research that builds on local knowledge, trust relationships, and continuous reflection. Theoretically, the paper contributes to remittances research by identifying and discussing the role of translocal interdependency, irregularity, and local debt in the financial practices of migrant households. Financial diaries are found useful for uncovering and further interrogating these dimensions, fostering a better understanding of remittances' heterogeneity. These methodological and theoretical contributions may be of value to scholars interested in advancing remittances research beyond the monetary and the instrumental. In addition, these contributions may be valuable for those working with financial diaries and similar money-oriented methods in settings that require a longitudinal and integrated tracking of people's practices.

The next section highlights some theoretical considerations for remittances research and provides background information on financial diaries. After describing the setting up of financial diaries in Muy Muy and the inevitable partiality each diary displays, the paper goes into the process of creating financial diaries and, particularly, the long-term commitment this entails. The paper then explores the merits of the method by drawing on illustrative participant examples that expose the translocal interdependency and irregularity of household practices. It considers gaps in diary information, highlighting the specific case of household debt in Muy Muy and its link with migration and remittances. The paper concludes by discussing the extent to which financial diaries are in need of a qualitative framework and their use in future research.

FROM REMITTANCES TO FINANCIAL DIARIES

Remittances provide a classic example of ties between migrants and their place of origin. The currently popular 'global remittance trend' (Kunz 2008) has co-opted remittances as a tool for development for these places of origin, based on their scale and their image as tangible and quantifiable, as well as their fit with neoliberal logics (De Haas 2010; Glick Schiller & Faist 2010) and ideas of bottom-up 'grassroots development' (Eversole 2005). Remittances seem 'democratic' (Raghuram 2007); apparently any migrant can generate them, make them flow directly to their intended beneficiaries 'at home', and further invest them. What is more, remitting is seen as 'natural' and 'virtuous': 'Transnational communities, corporate marketing strategies, and the dominant policy discourse … underwrite the same message: Good migrants remit' (Carling 2014, pp. 250–251). Although the international community acknowledges the challenges of generating, transferring and using remittances across a diversity of settings, these challenges are subordinated to remittances' positive implications (such as increased income). Remittances continue to be considered an interesting source of development funding.

For Nicaragua, where remittances play a substantial role in the national economy (OIM 2013), Jennings and Clarke (2005, p. 689) mention that '[t]his money comes with no strings attached'. This type of claim stands in stark contrast to translocal and ethnographic approaches that consider the role of remittances in maintaining social relationships (Trager 2005), and the way gender relations in particular organise remittances (Pessar & Mahler 2003). Remittances are influenced by people's social positioning and agency according to locally specific hierarchies, as well as by household configurations, job markets and investment possibilities. Although remittances are usually intended to improve circumstances 'at home', they depend as much on the locally specific development views, opportunities, and constraints as any other type of money, contributing to heterogeneous implications and indicating that migrants and their families cannot be expected just to make remittances-based development happen (Glick Schiller & Faist 2010; Geiger & Pécoud 2013). Moreover, an emphasis on remittances as a neutral and detached development instrument assigns an untenable responsibility to a relatively small group of migrants while structural obstacles to development remain unaddressed (Skeldon 2008).[3] To date, the dominant remittances discourse tends to downplay these nuancing observations (Lo 2008).

The idea for using financial diaries grew out of a search for adequate methods to capture the embeddedness of remittances in the Muy Muy setting. However, financial diaries are not tailor-made for researching remittances. They were developed to capture financial practices of 'the poor', the fluctuations in their income and assets and their strategies for dealing with these fluctuations, in order to facilitate their inclusion in mainstream financial services (Collins *et al.* 2009). While it is often assumed that low incomes allow for little management beyond mere survival, financial diaries can reveal how households deal with irregular money, including remittances, in resourceful, locally anchored ways.

The financial diaries' premise of long-term quantitative and qualitative tracking and integrating of practices is rather ambitious. However, apart from a number of practical considerations there has been little methodological reflection on creating financial diaries and their role in knowledge production.

Throughout this paper, I use other studies of financial diaries[4] as a guide for reflecting on the creation of Nicaraguan diaries. These studies have been conducted since the early 2000s in both urban and rural contexts in Bangladesh, India, South Africa, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda and the Philippines. The majority of these studies is concerned with microfinance services and financial literacy, but some take migration into account, either by focusing on microfinance services related to remittances (the mobile phone-based service M-PESA in Kenya, Morawczynski 2011; Stuart & Cohen 2011) or by targeting respondents with a background of migration (a group of formerly trafficked women in the Philippines, Tsai 2014). To the best of my knowledge, this paper is the first to primarily use financial diaries for capturing the embeddedness of remittances, and the first to analyse diaries in a Latin American context.

SETTING UP FINANCIAL DIARIES IN MUY MUY

During previous research in Muy Muy, I established contact with families that also provided a target group for creating financial diaries (Winters 2014). These families differ in composition, income levels and migration histories, but all have experience with remittances. Such remittances are not uncommon in the village. Despite Muy Muy's privileged location in a lucrative cattle-dairy chain, the majority of its inhabitants only has access to small-scale agricultural activities or otherwise unstable and informal jobs. The lack of local employment opportunities has historically contributed to temporary and regional migration to other municipalities and to Costa Rica, as well as long-distance migration to the United States and, more recently, to Spain (Grigsby & Pérez 2009; Steel *et al.* 2011). Predominantly based on nationwide household surveys, recent statistics estimate that about 7 per cent of Muy Muy households has international migrants, and about 4 per cent receives international remittances (INIDE 2008). However, taking into account the prevalence of internal, irregular and temporal migration, these numbers probably underestimate the weight of multiple migrations for households (OIM 2013).[5]

Against this dynamic backdrop, the tracking of household practices through financial practices was expected to generate further insight into remittances. This section gives a first overview then further explains the main characteristics of the financial diaries study in Muy Muy. A total of 16 participant households were selected from both the village urban centre and its rural areas, based on purposive snowball sampling through different gateways and household members' willingness to participate. Over the course of a year, a local research team of eight interviewers prepared financial diaries together with these 16 households. For each household, two interviewers sat together every two weeks with a committed adult household member who was considered knowledgeable.[6] They talked about the financial practices of the past weeks and filled in a locally appropriate diary format. Because of the volatility of migration in Muy Muy, any households' number of migrant members, their destinations and remittances changed throughout the year. A local research coordinator closely followed up on these developments as well as on the team's progress, training and logistics.

My previous research in Muy Muy facilitated the purposive snowball sampling also applied by most other financial diaries studies elsewhere. Although this type of sampling generally allows for familiarity, accessibility, and variety, it does not guarantee households' willingness. Among those who immediately and enthusiastically agreed, a few offered to take notes in between interviews in order to make creating diaries easier and faster. However, other potential participants excluded themselves based on the risk and burden of commitment. Some fear the amount of time and energy the interviews may take, especially when they are already older. In addition, some find it embarrassing that other people should know about their difficulty in making ends meet and the lengths to which they must go to achieve this (e.g. by assuming debt). These commitment issues were generally resolved by providing additional information. More challenging, however, was that some potential participants were afraid their financial practices would upset other family members. For example, the young mother Anabel (20–25)[7] told me, ‘Our stories wouldn’t add up! [My husband] will find out that I spend much more than he gives me, that I have all kinds of loans!’ (Interview, 24 September 2010). The willingness considerations of Anabel and others are important to take into account, not only because they touch upon the ethics of financial diaries research, but also because they are indicative of intra-household (gendered) power relations and locally specific (debt) infrastructures (see below).

Anabel’s worry also points to the limits on information that all financial diaries studies struggle with. I followed the strategy of the majority of such studies to interview the ‘most knowledgeable’ person as a proxy for the entire (self-defined) household. In practice, this person was a household member with whom a certain level of trust had already been established and who typically keeps track of the financial practices of all persons he/she considered part of the household. However, their information could never be complete. For practical reasons, participants were interviewed every two weeks, a frequency that reflects the local rhythm of salaries and other payments but also increases the chance that not all transactions are remembered. Although information became more accurate over time, completely recording all financial practices is perhaps an unrealistic goal. Like in any interview, participants forget or make mistakes, are not all-knowing, and sometimes choose to not tell the truth. Their perspectives, and their resulting diaries, form a partial and biased representation of households’ complicated constellations of financial practices. The matter of limited information is further complicated by the research emphasis on migration and remittances. Although some practices of household members living and working elsewhere were highlighted through financial diaries, for example, when tracking their remittances, other personal practices were beyond the diaries’ range and the picture of household practices can thus only be partial.[8]

Though accepting a certain level of partiality, the quality of diary information, the insight they could provide in household practices, remained the study’s main concern. It depended entirely on the adequacy of the financial diaries format and on the extent to which the local research team was trained and able to track changes and considerations. The formats were loosely based on the financial diaries used by Collins *et al.* (2009) and adapted to the context of Muy Muy in close, continuous cooperation with the local research team. Notably, the formats were revised to include household members’ migration by adding the location where money was earned and the possibility of recording data in US dollars next to córdobas, the Nicaraguan currency, as remittances are usually sent in dollars. The first part of the format concerned a household’s income from salary (see Table 1), self-employment and benefits (including non-monetary). The second part included expenditure for both household and self-employment. The third part detailed loans and the fourth part savings. Each part had a comments section for recording important events, reasons for any change in practices, and other remarks. Throughout the four parts, the aim was to strike a balance between maintaining the richness of the data while keeping formats as short and simple as possible, in order to prevent research fatigue and limit chances of confusion. The final interview length depended on the number and complexity of a household’s financial practices, but once a rhythm had been established an interview usually took about half an hour.

As compensation for the lack of pilot interviews, we[9] thoroughly practiced and improved the formats among the local research team. In this process, the insider knowledge and managing capacities of the local coordinator proved indispensable. Her familiarity with the village, experience with different research methods and trustworthy, responsible attitude were crucial for the research training and for managing the financial diaries data as well as the

Table 1. *A simplified financial diaries format on income.*

Value					Who earns the money?	With what kind of activity?	Where is the money earned?	Who manages the money?
Transactions	Amount	Currency (córdobas or US dollars)	Received daily, weekly, every two weeks, or monthly	Frequency (number of transactions per two weeks)	1. husband* 2. wife 3. ex-husband 4. son 5. daughter 6. son-in-law 7. daughter-in-law 8. grandson 9. granddaughter 10. father 11. mother 12. brother 13. sister 14. brother-in-law 15. sister-in-law 16. other (specify)	1. agriculture 2. livestock 3. construction 4. transport 5. security 6. shop 7. restaurant 8. domestic services 9. factory 10. hotel 11. social services 12. private office 13. public office 14. other (specify)	1. same community 2. other community in Muy Muy 3. urban centre 4. other Matagalpa municipality 5. Managua 6. somewhere else in Nicaragua (specify) 7. Costa Rica (urban) 8. Costa Rica (rural) 9. Central America 10. Spain 11. USA 12. other (specify)	1. husband 2. wife 3. son 4. daughter 5. son-in-law 6. daughter-in-law 7. grandson 8. granddaughter 9. father 10. mother 11. brother 12. sister 13. brother-in-law 14. sister-in-law 15. other (specify) (multiple answers possible)
1 2 3… 10								

Notes: 1st diary section: salary (translated from Spanish). The other sections are: income (self-employment, benefits); expenditures (for household, for self-employment); loans; savings. Each section includes space for comments. *The 'principal couple' of the household is the starting point for identifying other members.

interviewers. The interviewers were eight students from Matiguás, a town neighbouring Muy Muy, who were selected based on their previous research performance. It was a deliberate choice to select interviewers from nearby. Although most financial diaries studies stress the importance of a research team's familiarity with the context, they generally do not question issues of confidentiality between interviewers and diary participants. In this study, employing interviewers from a nearby town ensured familiarity yet safeguarded discretion for participant households. Logistically, the proximity of the interviewers also helped to ensure continuity. Their availability for the entire duration of the study was further encouraged by the prospect of receiving a financial bonus, a diploma of participation and a letter of recommendation upon completing the year.

Regarding the research team's training, this included the components of interview content, interview approach and techniques, and ethics. The content portion emphasised the research intention to gain insight into households' diverse financial practices over an extended period of time, with specific attention to migration and remittances. The diaries' ambitious premise was expected to be demanding and made it even more urgent to build familiarity and trust in order to obtain the highest quality data possible. The research team was encouraged to employ an open interview style to gain in-depth understanding while interviewing. Instead of merely reading questions and filling out boxes, interviewers let participants elaborate on their financial practices to get a better grasp of the rhythms and irregularities of a household. They used probing and asked follow-up questions to address gaps that were identified by increased knowledge of the households and awareness of the research goals. Finally, the ethics component of the training emphasised the importance of discretion and confidentiality, especially considering the sensitivity of the information shared, as well as decent appearance and courtesy throughout the research. It stressed the ability to inform participant households about the study but to refrain from advising them on personal matters. In addition, in order to safeguard the (feelings of) security of all participants, interviewers always worked in pairs of one man and one woman. As indicated below, this duo strategy also proved to be important for maintaining both interviewers' and households' participation.

CREATING DIARIES AND ESTABLISHING LONG-TERM COMMITMENTS

Before the diary interviews started, some introductory exchanges took place. These included a short memo with basic household information, an informed consent form, and a household resources sheet. The latter was divided into non-monetary (members, type of housing, electrical appliances, land, livestock, and large equipment including vehicles) and monetary (pocket money, savings and loans) resources. Although we expected most resources to remain undisclosed, at least in the beginning, filling in the sheet together allowed for further acquaintance between the interviewers and the households. Afterwards, I provided the interviewers feedback on their interviewing style and visited the households to make sure they felt comfortable with the interviewers. These introductory exchanges were indispensable in laying the groundwork for building familiarity and trust.

There were two final evaluations in addition to continuous evaluation of the diaries' progress through my regular contact with the local coordinator and participant households. One concerned an anonymous, written evaluation of the interviewers on the adequacy of the training, the relationship with participant households, and the value of information obtained. Although some interviewers thought the quality of information varied due to households' availability and possible 'research fatigue', the majority believed high quality data to have been obtained based on the trust established after spending considerable time together. As one of the interviewers wrote, 'it was talking and interviewing at the same time' (anonymous evaluation, 25 September 2011). This rather informal, conversation-like style can be considered an ideal to pursue in order to improve data quality, that is, the extent to which diaries do justice to household practices (see also Rutherford's 2002 paper on 'conversations with poor households').

The other final evaluation concerned an interview with participant households at the end of the year. During this interview, I not only tried to clarify some details of the households' last diaries but also asked about the participants' research experience. It is perhaps not surprising that the households that completed the year (see below) were positive about their participation. Apparently some felt they were doing me a favour, but still, this 'favour' entailed considerable commitment and required a positive experience. Almost all participants stressed how 'nice' it was to 'realise' how they managed their money. They used the financial diaries as a kind of mnemonic device.

Of the 16 households, 13 completed the research year.[10] When establishing the financial diaries method, Collins and her colleagues opted for the word '"diary", a term that appropriately conveys the sense that we are tracking *intimate* details of financial management *over time*' (Collins *et al.* 2009, p. 188, *my emphasis*).[11] This long-term commitment may in fact be the biggest stumbling block for continued participation. Of the three dropout households, two showed signs of 'research fatigue', in one case abandoning the study for two months, in another dropping out from time to time. Although their information is still valuable, it is not possible to give a consistent account of their practices. Finally, in the third case, a participant decided to join her husband in Costa Rica after 12 interviews. I always contacted households when they showed signs of dropping out, not so much to convince them (possibly against their will) to continue the study, but to see if there were (practical) issues that could be resolved in order to ensure data quality and hopefully, continued participation.

Closely related to dropping out, some interviewers suggested some sort of motivation – giving 'something' – in order to encourage household participation. Other financial diaries studies usually see fit to compensate households with gifts (although some pay per interview) for the considerable commitment that participating in a financial diaries study entails. In this study, we had no resources to pay per interview and instinctively found gifts less 'perverse' than payments, so we opted for small presents. These presents were selected in tune with local customs of showing appreciation and in consideration of what households may need and value. The presents[12] seemed greatly appreciated and therefore also contributed to research viability.

Long-term commitment proved to be more an issue for the research team itself, resurfacing from time to time. Despite the clear need for research continuity, this issue remains undiscussed in financial diaries studies. In this study, the local coordinator was crucial in encouraging the interviewers to dutifully complete the year. Additionally, in the specific context of Muy Muy and surroundings where there is low local availability of quality researchers, the strategy of interviewing in pairs was decisive. Because no interviewer wanted to put his or her pay and recommendation at risk, this peer monitoring stimulated dedication and professionalism that also contributed to a good understanding with participant households. Equally important, high levels of follow-up and reflection on all financial diary aspects enabled a productive research environment and lasting commitment.

ANALYSING FINANCIAL DIARIES

Having discussed some financial diaries considerations and decisions, this section explores the merits of financial diaries as a tracking method for capturing the embeddedness of remittances. Mainly based on an illustrative diary example of Carmen, one of the participants, it integrates initial quantitative and qualitative diary findings and links these to the Muy Muy setting in order to make sense of remittances' role in household financial practices. It discusses the translocal interdependency and irregularity of household practices, and points to unavoidable discrepancies or gaps in diary information as potential sources of knowledge.

Table 2. *Financial diaries of Carmen's household. A simplified overview of two months of income and expenditures.*

	Income	Source of income (in córdobas)		Expenditure	Type of expenditure (in córdobas)	
Week 1–2	7,166	Muy Muy	5,000	1,827	Food	800
		Costa Rica	1,083		Health	600
		Spain	1,083		Cable	120
					Water	107
					Electricity	200
Week 3–4	0			1,205	Food	600
					Health	400
					Cable	100
					Water	105
Week 5–6	0			2,340	Food	300
					Health	600
					Cable	100
					Transport	40
Week 7–8	4,000	Muy Muy	4,000	1,100	Food	300
					Debt repayment	700
					Social activities	100

Table 2 shows an overview of about two months[13] of income and expenditures of the household of Carmen (25–30), who lives in the urban centre with her mother Teresa and her two young sons. During the year, in addition to Teresa's income as an employee of a local primary school, the household received regular remittances from Carmen's husband in Spain and occasional remittances from Carmen's brother in Costa Rica. Like Carmen's household, almost all other participant households received remittances from members working in Costa Rica at a certain point, and some from members elsewhere in Nicaragua or in Spain as well. Mixing cross-border income earning strategies lends these households a translocal character and fits with the way people from Muy Muy have traditionally addressed limited local opportunities. Moreover, these households can only become and remain translocal because of their local 'anchoring' (Conway & Cohen 2003) in Muy Muy. Although only a minority of 'at-home' household members has formal, stable jobs like Teresa, the remainder still tries to generate income through diverse (seasonal) activities such as selling home-made goods, working as a day labourer, or providing domestic services. Patching together incomes from different localities, including Muy Muy, is a recurring theme in all financial diaries.

Financial diaries expose the translocal interdependency of household members and practices and provide clues for an interrogation of this interdependency beyond income. In particular, diary information counters ideas of non-migrant dependency on remittances (Mazzucato 2008) and points to the multi-faceted two-way process of remittances (Long 2008) in tune with shared cross-border household responsibilities (Winters 2014). It inspires questions about, for example, the ways in which those 'at home' use remittances to take care of migrant children, deal with migrant debt, and oversee migrant investment. Financial diaries provide topics of conversation to explore how these social and contextual dimensions intervene in the ways remittances take shape.

Such findings on translocal interdependency would probably not have emerged if we had only taken a snapshot of Carmen's household. A one-off interview would most likely have lacked the necessary trust to share details about remittances and other income, as well as the familiarity with the ways different household practices are integrated. In this regard, the interviewers' clarifications in the diaries' comments sections were of vital importance. This is illustrated, for example, by the case of Ofelia (25–30) and her mother, who share a household in the urban centre. This household deals with very limited, irregular income while entrusted with the care of several migrants' children. The interviewers' comments on this household's practices included: '[Ofelia] bought a bicycle in order to save the money invested [in the bicycle, i.e., to not spend it]'; 'the savings were used for food because they did not receive remittances', and 'given that [migrant family members] will be visiting during Easter, they haven't send any remittances'. Enabled by long-term tracking, these comments illustrate the ways household practices, including remittances, are related, and inspire an exploration of the ways social and contextual dimensions such as informal saving mechanisms and local celebrations may play a role in the particular ways they are integrated.

Returning to Carmen's diaries, two more aspects that are important for the social and contextual embedding of remittances can be discerned. First, the irregularity in the frequency and amount of income, especially remittances. Although Carmen's household started these two months with over 7,000 córdobas (about US$320 at the time of the research), it went without income for one month yet had to cover unexpected health expenditures. This irregularity was underlined by Carmen's comment that she feels insecure because she never knows what amount to expect from her husband in Spain (interview 28 September 2011). Irregularity not only requires inventive money management, especially in a context where (formal) social safety nets are limited, but also inspires questions about the power dynamics that are part of translocal interdependency. For example, how is Carmen's concern about remittances from her husband, who is responsible for providing for the family, related to her own responsibility of daily care for their children, and her own opportunities for decision-making, migrating and remitting? Irregularity, especially regarding the when and why of certain remittances, thus provides clues for interrogating gender-based migration differentiation (Winters 2014) and other local stratifications.

A second aspect of importance for embedding remittances that appears in Carmen's diaries is the discrepancy between income and expenditure. Most households initially report more expenditures than income because trust still has to be built, but in Carmen's case it was the other way around. Throughout the year, we worked towards a convergence between income and expenditures (see also Collins *et al.* 2009), but not until the final evaluative interview a major discrepancy was resolved, when Carmen reported a number of monthly debt repayments for a television and a wardrobe bought on credit. She had become so used to these that she had forgotten to mention them. As these debt repayments did not concern daily necessities, she was also not reminded of them in a 'natural' way. Given the trust between Carmen and the interviewers, and many conversations about all kinds of delicate financial practices including health expenses and savings, this diary gap seems to result not from distrust or chariness, but from the very common, mundane nature of the practice concerned, that is, buying on credit. In the next section I will briefly discuss how financial diaries facilitate an exploration of the ways this particular local loan practice intersects with remittances.

SEEING THE GOOD IN GAPS: DEBT, MIGRATION AND REMITTANCES

> *Ya descubrió que debo en tres partes* (You already discovered that I owe [money] in three places: interview with diary participant Nieves 50–55, 6 October 2011)
>
> *No doy crédito pero damos* (I don't sell on credit but we do: interview with shop owner Gricelda, age unknown, 11 February 2011).

Throughout the year, several discrepancies in diary information were resolved, but particularly the final evaluative interview facilitated an identification of specific loans as the cause of structural gaps. Based on the cornerstone of financial diaries, repeated interviewing, and the trust, familiarity, and understanding generated over a year, the final interview provided a fruitful setting for unravelling loan contracts. As revealed by the diaries, all participant households take out loans from family or friends, microfinance institutions and banks in order to finance expenditures like household appliances, agricultural inputs, and home construction materials. At least as common is to *fiar* (literally, to trust), which refers to the day-to-day practice of buying daily necessities from local vendors on credit. Households make frequent use of *fiar* to deal with the volatility of their income. Carmen, for example, viewed it as a habit that makes sure you always have something (interview 28 September 2011). As illustrated by participant comments like those at the beginning of this section, *fiar* and other forms of debt are considered accessible and acceptable ways to make ends meet, a common response to unstable incomes and a lack of (formal) social safety nets (see also Guérin *et al.* 2014).

Although the above seems to legitimise and normalise the practice of *fiar*, it also raises questions about its risks. In an earlier section, Anabel (20–25) already alluded to the possibility of intra-household friction that loan practices may evoke. Beyond household level, risks of *fiar* were further explored in complementary interviews with six local vendors (of whom one was also the mother of a diary participant) employed in a cooperative, three *pulperías* (small in-house grocery stores) and two bigger shops. These vendors discussed negative side-effects of *fiar*, in particular, the exclusion of people not deemed trustworthy, potential conflicts concerning repayment, and even business failure. For households, the practice of *fiar* may generate a cycle of seemingly never-ending and possibly unrealistic debt repayments, and even a loss of resources.

As a locally specific, socio-economic practice, *fiar* is part of the embedding of remittances that financial diaries can help uncover and interrogate. By virtue of their longitudinal and integrated character, the diaries offer clues for linking a certain amount, source and timing of remittances with practices of assuming and paying debt. They also suggest how debt may enable as well as encourage migration. Participants contract loans to be able to migrate, but they also use remittances for loan circulation and repayment. For example, when I asked Diego (25–30), who would later become a diary participant, what he did with the money he brought home from Costa Rica, he responded 'you go away because you owe money, you try to find your way out of debt' (interview 4 February 2010). Debt, migration and remittances are key elements of the precarious, translocal household economy in villages like Muy Muy (see also Villarreal 2008; Guérin *et al.* 2014; Morvant-Roux 2014). However, they have not received due attention (Stoll 2010; Toruño 2010). In particular, the extent to which debt, migration and remittances increase households' opportunities and resilience or else lead to further reproduction of vulnerabilities and exclusion by eroding their material and non-material assets (Mosse *et al.* 2002) needs to be explored further, taking concrete social and contextual dimensions into account (see also Villarreal 2008). The specific changes and considerations of household practices that financial diaries are able to track provide fruitful entry points for these explorations into remittances' heterogeneity.

CONCLUSION

In response to the methodological challenge of exploring social and contextual dimensions of remittances, this paper discussed the considerations and decisions that were part of creating financial diaries and showed how these diaries can help capture the embeddedness of remittances. Using quantitative and qualitative tracking of household practices over time, financial diaries expose the translocal interdependency and irregularity of these practices, providing clues for integrating instead of isolating remittances. Monetary details of financial diaries provide topics of conversation that help explore remittances' role in locally anchored household practices such as debt in Muy Muy, contributing to a better understanding of the heterogeneous character of remittances.

Next to these substantive findings, the detailed methodological discussion offered here also advances the financial diaries method itself. The paper demonstrates that creating financial diaries needs to be part of a larger, reflexive study in which trust and first-hand knowledge of the research setting are primary concerns for ensuring research quality and viability. Although other financial diaries studies commonly suggest strengthening diary findings through triangulation with other quantitative and/or qualitative research methods, based on our Muy Muy experience we believe the diaries need a decisively qualitative framework. A qualitative framework facilitates essential reflections on the contributions financial diaries can make. In particular, these reflections include an acknowledgement of diaries' partiality, as well as of the way this partiality may allow for a discussion of household experiences and perspectives. The latter also helps address a shortcoming of the financial diaries method as elaborated by Collins *et al.* (2009), that is, its emphasis on narrow and technical aspects of money to the detriment of its social dimensions (Guérin *et al.* 2014; Schwittay 2014). The paper demonstrates that the premise of financial diaries lends itself to including non-monetary dimensions instead of sidelining them. The name 'financial diaries' then becomes too limited, and may need to be substituted by something along the lines of 'socio-economic household diaries'.

The reflection on financial diaries offered here points to the strength of repeated interviewing over time. Financial diaries may therefore be particularly useful in dynamic contexts like Muy Muy, where household practices are volatile and interview formats need to be able to capture the changes and considerations involved with these practices. Although a lack of research resources in Muy Muy has so far prevented this, future remittances research may be enriched by creating multi-sited diaries, by comparing diaries from dissimilar participants and households, and by opening up spaces for increased participant reflection, for example, in group discussions. These strategies would allow for a further exploration of local differentiations. Future research avenues may also include how financial diaries reflect local priorities and views regarding development, by capturing households' specific use of remittances in tune with other practices. At the very least, creating financial diaries contributes to a rethinking of remittances as (merely) neutral and detached monetary vehicles for development, as echoed in the dominant remittances discourse. Financial diaries expose remittances as part of the interdependency among migrants, their household members, and their locally anchored financial practices. Such social and contextual embedding advances remittances research.

Acknowledgements

This research has benefited from a wide range of individuals and institutions, for which I am grateful. The Flemish Interuniversity Council VLIR-UOS and the IOB Research Fund provided funding. Mike Ferguson of Microfinance Opportunities and Isabelle Guérin of the Institute of Research Development/Paris I Sorbonne University generously shared their questionnaires and training guides. Gert Van Hecken shared his research guidelines and kindly assisted with selecting and managing the researchers in Nicaragua. Participants of the final conference of the TCRA-Ghana Project gave inspiring feedback on my financial diaries presentation. Johan Bastiaensen, Griet Steel, and three anonymous reviewers provided useful comments on an earlier draft. Finally, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all the families who participated in the financial diaries study, and to the indispensable local research team.

Notes

1. This paper focuses on monetary remittances, and does not include discussions of in-kind and social remittances. This being said, in-kind transactions can be usefully included in financial diaries studies, and financial diaries allow for a tracking of changes in practices (and the considerations behind these) that may be related to social remittances.
2. See, for example, research on translocal livelihoods (Long 2008).
3. In addition, although this question is outside the scope of this paper, we can ask whether it is ethical to expect development from migrants when their rights are often trampled upon and migration often endangers their personal wellbeing (Glick Schiller & Faist 2010).

4. See for example, Collins *et al.* (2009); Kamath *et al.* (2009); Kumar & Mukhopadhyay (2013); Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta (2013); Morawczynski (2011); Rutherford (2002); Ruthven & Kumar (2002); Stuart (2012); Stuart & Cohen (2011); Stuart *et al.* (2011); Tsai (2014).
5. For example, a representative survey conducted as part of the broader ethnographic research in Muy Muy indicates that between 47–49 per cent of households has experience with internal, regional, and/or international migration, either past or present. Between 85–89 per cent of the migrants involved with present migrations remit.
6. Given the nature and course of the broader ethnographic research these financial diaries were part of, for a large part based on personal relationships between a (female) researcher and (female) participants, the financial diary participant was usually a woman.
7. All names in this paper are pseudonyms. I make use of age ranges of five years to most accurately reflect diary participants' ages over multiple years of research.
8. For an example of simultaneous transnational research, see Mazzucato (2008) on the SMS methodology.
9. 'We' refers to the author of this paper, also the principal researcher, and the local research team. 'I' refers to the author only.
10. Although half of these remaining 13 households missed one or a few interviews in the course of the year, we do not think this affected our overall insight in the dynamics of their practices.
11. The word 'diary' also evokes images of research participants writing their own financial diaries, instead of being interviewed about their practices. However, this seemed impossible in the Muy Muy setting, where the literacy of most of the 'most knowledgeable' adults of participant households was limited. This being said, participant information and reflections constitute the corner stone of Muy Muy diaries. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to financial diaries' potential for 'the co-production and co-authored publication of knowledge' in research settings where participants are confident writers, in the spirit of the work by Richa Nagar (2013).
12. On the consent form, we indicated that participant households could expect a gift half way and towards the end of the year. In practice, in tune with important village events, we provided a Christmas gift, a (re-usable) basket of daily necessities including rice, beans, sugar, cooking oil and soap. We also provided a decorative Mother's Day gift, and a Dutch souvenir at the end of the year.
13. These two months are instructive of the whole year. I have selected a specific period that aptly demonstrates the use of financial diaries for embedding remittances.

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