

## Migrant Associations: Enhancing Migrant Agency and Advancing Social Justice

### Asociaciones de migrantes: Fortaleciendo la capacidad de acción de los migrantes y promoviendo la Justicia Social

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Sent: 2025/03/18  
Accepted: 2025/06/09  
Published: 2025/06/30

#### Abstract

Migrant associations play a crucial role in enhancing migrant agency and advancing social justice by fostering social, economic, and political empowerment. This article develops a conceptual framework that integrates theories of migrant agency, social justice and migration, examining how migrants navigate structural constraints while actively shaping their own mobility and integration experiences. Drawing on existing literature and the author's Doctoral dissertation, it also presents a state-of-the-art review of migrant associations, highlighting their functions, challenges, and impact. The study explores the multifaceted role of migrant associations in empowering migrants across different domains. Social and cultural empowerment is achieved through the preservation of cultural identity, language programs, and social integration initiatives. Economic empowerment and labor rights advocacy focus on skill development, employment support, and advocacy for fair wages and working conditions. Legal and political empowerment is facilitated through legal aid, advocacy for migrant rights, and political mobilization to influence policies affecting migrant communities. Migrant associations further contribute to social capital and community building by strengthening networks, fostering solidarity, and bridging ties between migrant groups and host societies. Additionally, these organizations play a vital role in crisis response, providing emergency relief. The findings underscore the importance of legal recognition of human and labour rights, as well as policy frameworks that support and collaborate with migrant-led organizations to ensure inclusive and just societies. Ultimately, this article argues that migrant associations are not only essential for migrant agency but also key actors in the broader struggle for social justice.

**Summary:** Introduction, Methodology, Conceptual Framework, Migrant Association: Enhancing Migrant Agency and Advancing Social Justice, Conclusions.

**How to cite:** Castillo Rueda, V. (2025). Migrant Associations: Enhancing Migrant Agency and Advancing Social Justice Order. *Revista Tecnológica - Espol*, 37(1), 134-155.  
<https://rte.espol.edu.ec/index.php/tecnologica/article/view/1293>

**Keywords:** Migrant Empowerment, Rights, Social Capital, Advocacy, Community Building.

### Resumen

Las asociaciones de migrantes desempeñan un papel crucial en el fortalecimiento de la agencia migrante y la promoción de la justicia social, fomentando el empoderamiento en los ámbitos social, económico y político. Este artículo propone un marco conceptual que integra teorías sobre agencia migrante y justicia social, explorando cómo los migrantes enfrentan restricciones estructurales mientras construyen activamente sus trayectorias de movilidad e integración. A partir de la literatura y de la tesis doctoral del autor, se revisa el estado del arte sobre asociaciones de migrantes, analizando sus funciones, desafíos e impactos. Estas asociaciones impulsan el empoderamiento social y cultural mediante la preservación de la identidad, programas lingüísticos e iniciativas de integración. En lo económico, promueven la capacitación, el acceso al empleo y la defensa de condiciones laborales justas. Desde lo político y legal, ofrecen apoyo jurídico, defienden derechos y movilizan a las comunidades migrantes para influir en políticas públicas. Además, fortalecen el capital social al tejer redes, fomentar la solidaridad y construir puentes con las sociedades de acogida. Su rol es igualmente fundamental en contextos de crisis, brindando ayuda humanitaria y apoyo de emergencia. El estudio subraya la importancia de marcos normativos que reconozcan los derechos humanos y laborales de las personas migrantes, y que respalden legal y políticamente a sus organizaciones. En última instancia, se argumenta que las asociaciones de migrantes son actores clave no solo en la construcción de su propia agencia, sino también en la lucha colectiva por sociedades más justas e inclusivas.

**Palabras clave:** Empoderamiento migrante, derechos, capital social, incidencia política, construcción de comunidad.

### Introduction

Migration is a defining phenomenon of the contemporary world, shaping societies economically, politically, and culturally. Migrants face significant structural challenges – not only during their journey, but also in their daily lives within countries of residence, including legal barriers, labor exploitation, social exclusion, and limited access to essential services. However, migration is not solely defined by constraints; migrants also actively shape their own experiences and outcomes, demonstrating agency in navigating complex socio-political environments. This article examines the critical role of migrant associations in enhancing migrant agency and advancing social justice, providing a comprehensive analysis of how these organizations empower migrants across various domains.

To ground this discussion, the article develops a conceptual framework integrating theories of migrant agency, social justice, and migration studies. Migrant agency refers to the capacity of migrants to act independently and make choices despite the constraints imposed by legal, economic, and social structures (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011; de Haas, 2014). Social justice, as articulated by Rawls (1971), Fraser (1995) and Sen (2009), involves the full respect for and realization of human rights, including rights at work, resources, and opportunities, ensuring that all individuals regardless of their migration status can participate fully in society. Migrant associations, which are grassroots or formal organizations established by and for migrants, serve as vital spaces where migrant agency is expressed and where social justice is pursued (Cordero-Guzmán, 2005; Portes et al., 2007). The state of research on migrant associations highlights their diverse functions, from service provision and advocacy to political mobilization and cultural preservation (Fennema, 2004; Lacroix, 2010).

This article explores how migrant associations enhance migrant agency and advance social justice through various mechanisms. Firstly, social and cultural empowerment is facilitated through initiatives such as language programs, cultural events, and identity preservation, which help newly arrived and longtime resident migrants navigate the local environments while maintaining ties to their heritage. Secondly, economic empowerment and labor rights advocacy play a crucial role in securing fair employment conditions, promoting entrepreneurship, and combating workplace exploitation. Thirdly, legal and political empowerment is achieved through legal aid, awareness campaigns, and political mobilization efforts that advocate for migrants' rights and policy reforms. Additionally, migrant associations contribute to social capital and community building by fostering networks that provide emotional and material support while also strengthening ties between migrant communities and host societies. Lastly, these organizations are instrumental in humanitarian support and crisis response, offering emergency aid, housing assistance, and essential services to migrants in vulnerable situations.

By analyzing the functions and impact of migrant associations, this article argues that these organizations are not only essential for the integration and well-being of migrant communities, but also serve as key actors in broader struggles for social justice. Recognizing and supporting their work is crucial in developing more inclusive and equitable societies. Through a review of existing literature and empirical case studies, this study highlights the transformative potential of migrant associations as vehicles of empowerment, solidarity, and systemic change.

### **Methodology**

This study builds upon the author's doctoral research on Andean migrant associations' engagement in both host and home countries, specifically focusing on the experiences of Bolivian, Colombian, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian migrant organizations in the Cantons of Geneva and Vaud, Switzerland.

Additional research focuses on migrant agency and social justice and migration. This article integrates primary and secondary data collection methods to examine how migrant associations enhance migrant agency and contribute to social justice.

### **PhD dissertation**

#### ***Primary Data Collection***

For the PhD dissertation, primary data was collected through a mixed-methods approach, including:

- Semi-structured interviews with twelve presidents of the 12 Andean migrant associations active in the Cantons of Geneva and Vaud in Switzerland, to gain insights into their organizational strategies, challenges, and their role in host and home countries.
- A survey distributed among members of migrant associations to gather quantitative data on their activities, perceptions, and the effectiveness of their initiatives.
- Participant observation, allowing for a deeper understanding of the associations' internal dynamics, decision-making processes, and interactions with migrant communities.

### **Secondary Data Collection**

To contextualize and complement the primary data, a desk review of relevant literature and policy documents was conducted. This included:

- Academic publications on transnationalism and migrant associations.
- Reports from international organizations and NGOs addressing migrant associations' roles in advocacy, integration, and rights protection.
- Policy documents from Swiss authorities and international bodies to examine the institutional environment in which these associations operate.

### **Research on migrant agency and social justice**

Building on the doctoral research, additional secondary data analysis was undertaken to establish the role of migrant associations in enhancing migrant agency and advancing social justice. This involved a review of literature on migrant agency theories, social justice frameworks, and migration, allowing for a broader theoretical grounding. To illustrate the role of migrant associations in enhancing migrant agency and advancing social justice, the author draws on examples of Latin American migrant associations in Europe, the United States, and Latin America, complementing the findings of her doctoral research.

By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this article provides a comprehensive understanding of how migrant associations function as key actors in social justice movements and migrant empowerment.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Migrant Agency**

Migrant agency refers to the capacity of migrants to act independently, make choices, and exert influence over their own migration experiences despite structural constraints such as legal restrictions, economic barriers, and social exclusion (Glick Schiller & Çaglar, 2009). In migration studies, agency is often discussed in relation to migrants' ability to navigate migration policies, labor markets, social networks, and integration processes (Bakewell, 2010).

Scholars distinguish between individual agency and collective agency. Individual agency refers to the strategies that migrants personally adopt to navigate and overcome obstacles, such as securing informal employment, adapting to legal systems, or cultural differences (Mahler & Pessar, 2006). Collective agency, on the other hand, emerges through social movements, migrant organizations, and transnational networks that advocate for migrants' rights and social inclusion (Faist, 2000).

Scholars such as Emirbayer & Mische (1998) highlight agency as a temporally embedded process involving past experiences, present engagement, and future-oriented aspirations. In the context of migration, De Haas (2010) argues that agency operates within structural opportunities and constraints, with migrants actively shaping their migration trajectories, settlement processes, and transnational networks.

### **Structural Constraints**

Despite their agency, migrants operate within powerful structural constraints, including restrictive immigration laws, labor exploitation, and social discrimination (De Haas, 2010). Some scholars argue that agency is constrained by state policies that categorize migrants into hierarchical legal statuses, limiting their ability to access rights and services (Anderson, 2010).

For instance, the concept of “bounded agency” (Evans, 2007) suggests that migrants' decisions are not entirely free but are shaped by legal frameworks, economic inequalities, and social hierarchies. Migrants with precarious legal status, such as undocumented workers or asylum seekers, may exercise agency in limited ways, such as engaging in informal labor markets or creating mutual aid networks (Bloch, Sigona & Zetter, 2014). However, migrants also demonstrate strategic agency by using legal loopholes, engaging in advocacy, and mobilizing networks to challenge exclusion (Schapendonk, 2018).

### ***The Role of Social Capital and Networks***

Social networks and social capital play a crucial role in enabling migrant agency by providing access to jobs, legal support, and community resources (Portes, 1998). Migrants rely on both bonding social capital (ties within their ethnic communities) and bridging social capital (connections with broader society) to improve their socio-economic conditions (Putnam, 2000). Cederberg (2012) highlights how migrant networks can facilitate economic mobility and political participation, particularly for marginalized groups. However, excessive reliance on bonding capital within ethnic enclaves can also limit opportunities for integration into the broader society (Vermeulen, 2006).

Furthermore, transnational networks allow migrants to sustain ties with their countries of origin while negotiating new identities in host societies (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Hometown associations and diaspora organizations exemplify how migrant agency extends beyond national borders, influencing development in both countries of origin and residence (Orozco & Rouse, 2007).

### ***Migrant Agency in the Context of Social Justice and Advocacy***

Migrants exercise agency not only in individual survival strategies but also in collective struggles for social justice. Migrant-led organizations play a critical role in mobilizing communities, advocating for legal rights, and fighting discrimination (Morales & Giugni, 2011).

The role of digital agency is also gaining attention, as migrants use social media platforms to organize protests, share information, and access resources (Leurs & Prabhakar, 2018). This new dimension of migrant agency enables even those in precarious situations to engage in advocacy and resistance.

Somerville et al. (2008) argue that migrant associations contribute to political empowerment by increasing migrant participation in governance. In Switzerland, for instance, migrant-led organizations have influenced policies related to asylum-seeker protections and anti-discrimination laws (Bolzman & Fibbi, 1991). Migrant agency is exercised in multiple ways, including economic participation, political activism, and community engagement. Migrant associations are key platforms through which collective agency is mobilized, enabling migrants to advocate for rights, access resources, and participate in social and political life in both origin and host countries.

## **Social Justice and Migration**

### ***Definition of Social Justice***

Social justice refers to the respect for, protection of and realization of all human rights for all persons in society. It seeks to eliminate systemic inequalities and discrimination related to race, gender, class, nationality, and other social categories, ensuring that all individuals have access to the same opportunities and protections. Several scholars define social justice in different ways:

- John Rawls' (1971) theory of justice aims to reconcile the tension between individual liberty and social equality, advocating for a system that prioritizes fairness and emphasizing equal access to basic liberties, opportunities, and resources for all members of society, particularly those who are least advantaged in society.
- Nancy Fraser (1995) argues that social justice involves both redistribution (economic fairness) and recognition (cultural and identity-based equality).
- Amartya Sen's (1999) capabilities framework highlights the importance of individual freedoms and capabilities in achieving justice.

### ***Social Justice Principles***

Various scholars and organizations have contributed to defining the principles of social justice. Below are the key principles:

- **Human Rights and Dignity:** Social justice is fundamentally tied to the respect for, protection, promotion and realisation of all human rights, ensuring that all persons in society are treated with dignity (UN DESA, 2006). This includes the right to work, freedom of movement, and protection from discrimination.
- **Equity:** It refers to the fair distribution of resources and opportunities, taking into account historical and structural disadvantages that different groups face (Rawls, 1971). Unlike equality, which provides the same treatment for all, equity acknowledges that individuals have diverse needs and circumstances that require targeted interventions (Fraser, 1997).
- **Access:** It ensures that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background, migration status, or ethnicity, have the ability to utilize essential services, including education, healthcare, housing, and employment (Sen, 2009). Restricted access to these services creates systemic inequalities that hinder social justice.
- **Participation:** Social justice requires active and meaningful participation of all individuals in political, economic, and social life (Young, 1990). Migrants, for example, should have a voice in policymaking processes that affect their lives and be included in decision-making structures.
- **Diversity and Recognition:** Recognizing and valuing diversity ensures that the cultural, linguistic, and social identities of marginalized groups are acknowledged and respected (Taylor, 1992). Fraser (1997) distinguishes between redistribution and recognition, arguing that social justice must address both economic inequalities and cultural misrecognition.
- **Redistribution of Resources:** Economic justice is a core component of social justice, emphasizing the need to redistribute wealth, opportunities, and power to ensure a fairer society (Harvey, 1973; Piketty, 2014). This principle is particularly relevant in migration contexts, where migrant workers often face economic exploitation and below- living- wage disparities.
- **Accountability and Fair Governance:** Social justice requires mechanisms of accountability to ensure that governments, institutions, and corporations uphold human rights, international labour standards and fair policies and practices (Stiglitz, 2012). Transparent governance structures that involve marginalized communities in decision-making help in fostering just societies.

### ***Migration and Social Justice: A Rights-Based Approach***

Migration has been a defining aspect of human history, shaping societies, economies, and cultures worldwide (UN DESA, 2022). While migration offers opportunities for individuals and communities, it also presents significant challenges, particularly in ensuring that migrants' rights and dignity are protected. A social justice approach to migration emphasizes the need for policies that promote equity, inclusion, and human rights, regardless of a migrant's legal status (UNHCR, 2023).

Migrants often face systemic barriers that limit their access to employment, healthcare, education, and legal protection. These challenges are exacerbated by intersecting factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (IOM, 2022). Refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants are particularly at risk of exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion from social and legal protections (MPI, 2022).

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), migrant workers frequently experience labor market segmentation, where they are concentrated in low-wage, insecure, or informal employment sectors. Many also lack access to social security benefits, making them vulnerable to economic shocks. In addition, migrants face significant healthcare disparities, with many unable to access adequate medical services due to their legal status or financial barriers (WHO, 2022).

### ***The Role of Social Justice in Migration Policy***

A social justice framework seeks to address these inequalities by advocating for policies that uphold human dignity and rights. Right-based migration policies should:

- **Ensure Legal Protections and Respect for Human Rights:** Migrants, regardless of their status, asylum seekers and refugees must have access to legal pathways for residency and protection from exploitation. Asylum seekers must have access to fair asylum procedures (UNHCR, 2023).
- **Promote Economic Justice:** Migrant workers deserve fair wages, safe working conditions, and equal access to labor and social protections (ILO, 2019).
- **Guarantee Access to Essential Services:** Healthcare, education, and housing should be accessible to migrants, regardless of immigration status (WHO, 2022).
- **Combat Xenophobia and Discrimination:** Anti-migrant narratives contribute to exclusion and violence. Governments and civil society must work to foster inclusive and rights-based policies (MPI, 2022).

### ***Gender, Migration, and Social Justice***

Gender plays a critical role in shaping migration experiences. Women and marginalized gender groups face additional risks, including gender-based violence, labor exploitation, and limited access to reproductive healthcare (UN Women, 2019). The International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2023) highlights that women migrant workers, especially domestic workers, often face abusive working conditions and lack legal protections, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

A gender-responsive approach to migration policy is essential. The ILO Convention No. 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers (ILO, 2019) sets international labor standards to protect migrant domestic workers, emphasizing fair wages and safe working conditions. Similarly, the Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC, 2023) stresses the need for gender-sensitive migration policies that address the unique challenges faced by migrant women, including access to healthcare, child protection, and legal assistance.



### ***Global Responsibility and Human Rights***

Migration governance must align with international normative human rights frameworks, in particular the three international 'migration governance' conventions: the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrants Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW), and ILO Convention 97 on migration for employment and ILO Convention 143 on migrant workers. The ILO international labor standards apply to all migrant workers and should be incorporated in national law to uphold decent work for all workers.

Governments, international organizations, and civil society must collaborate to uphold the adoption and domestication of international conventions on the rights of all migrants/migrant workers. In this regard, migrant associations have a role to play as advocates for rights-based policies, holding governments accountable and ensuring that migrants' voices are heard in policy dialogues. Through representation and empowerment, they help migrants understand and claim their rights, fostering active civic participation. Furthermore, by building solidarity across transnational networks and forging alliances with labor unions and civil society, they strengthen collective action toward better migration governance and social justice.

The Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2025) reports that in 2024, the global number of international migrants was 304 million and female migrants constituted 48 per cent of this population. Addressing migration through a rights-based approach requires long-term commitments to humanitarian protection, economic integration, and anti-discrimination measures.

A socially just migration framework acknowledges migrants' dignity and contributions while addressing systemic inequalities. It requires inclusive policies, international cooperation, and a shift away from restrictive and punitive migration laws toward rights-based, humane solutions. Migration should be recognized as a driver of development and social progress, benefiting both migrants and the communities that host them (World Bank, 2022).

### **State of the Art on Migrant Associations<sup>1</sup>**

The study of migrant organizations, including associations, is complex due to the multiple elements involved and the absence of an agreed-upon definition of this phenomenon. Some scholars focus on the definition and the role of a migrant association (Fennema, 2004; Moya 2005; Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005; Cordero, 2005), others focus on the migrant organizing process (Cordero, 2005; Lacroix, 2010; Vermeulen, 2006), and yet others combine the phenomenon with the study of social capital and networks (Cederberg, 2012; Eggert & Pilati, 2014; Fennema, 2004;) or with the political opportunity structure (Bolzman & Fibbi, 1991; Danase, 2001; Fennema & Tillie 1999; Jacob & Tillie 2004, Hooghe, 2005, Morales & Giugni, 2011; Tackle, 2013). Other scholars concentrate on the complementary nature of migrant organizations' activities in both origin and destination countries (Portes *et al.*, 2007), their active role on integration (Portes *et al.*, 2007; Somerville *et al.*, 2008) or on development (Fox & Bada, 2009, Lacroix 2010, Lacroix, 2016; Orozco & Garcia, 2009, Orozco & Rouse, 2007).

Another complexity is the diverse terms used to describe migrant organizations, such as ethnic organization (Fennema, 2004; Hoogue, 2005), migrant community base organization (Cordero-Guzman, 2005), hometown association (commonly used in the US, e.g. Lacroix 2010; Orozco & Garcia, 2009; Orozco & Rouse, 2007; Somerville *et al.*, 2008), and migrant

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<sup>1</sup> This section is an extract of the author's PhD dissertation on Andean migrant associations' host and home country engagement. Lessons from the Cantons of Geneva and Vaud, Switzerland, University of Geneva.



association, indistinctly of organization type<sup>2</sup> (Camozzi, 2011; Caponio, 2005; Cattacin & La Barba, 2007; Moya, 2005; Vermeulen, 2006).

### ***Defining migrant associations***

It is important to recognize that migrant associations are one form of migrant organizations, which can take many forms, and often coexist in a given society (Breton, 1964; Moya, 2005; Sardinha, 2009; Vermeulen, 2006). Examples include credit and business associations, mutual benefit societies, religious, sport, educational, dance, gastronomy and recreational groups, hometown and women's associations, student organizations, solidarity and political and advocacy groups. There are also migrant organizations established by migrants and those established for migrants (Vermeulen, 2006). This study focuses on migrant associations, defined by Fennema (2004) as those migrant organizations with affiliates or members.

Schrover and Vermeulen (2005), as well as Moya (2005), question the extent to which an organization can be labelled as a migrant association. Is it because its members are migrants, or because most of them are descendants of migrants? Does it refer to associations established by first-generation migrants with mixed membership, or those founded by natives but with mostly migrant membership? Such a line of questioning leads to the fundamental question of when a migrant association should no longer be classified as a "migrant" association, but rather convert to an organization of some other label, such as an ethnic association. Does it depend on whether they are founded or managed by second or third generation-migrants? These are complex considerations, and, as reflected in the previous section, there is no consensus on a precise definition by scholars working in this area.

Given the characteristics of the target group and focus of this study, *migrant associations are defined as membership organizations formed by individuals from the same country of origin with the aim to provide social services mostly to migrants from the same or similar migrant group* (Cordero-Guzman, 2005, Somerville *et al.*, 2008). They explicitly integrate ethnic or national origin identity and cultural components into their mission, activities, and services (Cordero-Guzman, 2005).

### ***Factors stimulating the formation of migrant associations***

Factors related to the migrant group, as well as the host society, influence and stimulate the formation of migrant associations (Cordero-Guzman, 2005, Vermeulen<sup>3</sup>, 2006). According to Vermeulen (2006), the migration process shapes the collective identity of migrant groups, which raises the demand for migrant associations, or contributes to disruption in migrants' lives that increases the demand for a safe environment which, in turn, increases the demand for migrant associations. Other key considerations that influence the migrant organizing process include the specific characteristics of the migrant population, such as their size, demographic composition, socioeconomic status and cultural attributes. The active or passive attitude towards migrant associations by countries of origin can also influence the formation of migrant associations.

<sup>2</sup> Credit and business associations, mutual benefit societies, religious, sport, educational and recreational groups, hometown and women associations, student organizations, solidarity institutions and political and advocacy groups (Breton, 1964; Moya 2005; Vermeulen, 2006; Sardinha, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> The author researched and documented the structural determinants of the migration organizing process comparing three migrant groups in two different cities (Turks in Amsterdam, Turks in Berlin and Surinamese in Amsterdam) and provided evidence of the influence of migrant group, host society and internal dynamics within groups of organizations in the migrant organizing process.

According to Vermeulen (2006), several factors play a role in the host society in the migrant organizing process. For instance, the economic opportunity structure can impact the labour position of migrants at the local level, motivating them to organize and establish migrant associations, or to join existing ones. Similarly, migrant accessibility to institutions such as churches, labour unions and welfare organizations can affect the formation of migrant associations: If migrants have easy access to these organizations and their services, the need to create a migrant association declines. Finally, scholars identify the political opportunity structure, or official stance authorities have towards migrants and their organizations, as a critical factor (Danase, 2001; Hooghe, 2005; Morales & Giugni, 2011; Schrover & Vermeulen, 2005; Tackle, 2013; Vermeulen, 2006).

### ***Key characteristics of migrant associations***

Migrant associations play a key role in providing a space (not necessarily physical) for people from the same ethnic or national origin to gather, play, dance and reminisce (Moya, 2005), constituting a key source for socialization, conviviality, mutual aid and identity renewal. They also assist with the migrant process, contributing to the socio-economic integration of migrants into the host society by providing a diversity of social services and community programmes, including advocating for their ethnic groups needs and concerns and representing them in host society political and policy processes, while promoting and preserving connections between migrant communities in the host country and their country of origin and vice versa (Cordero-Guzman, 2005; Moya, 2005; Odmalm, 2004).

Migrant associations frequently replace support systems traditionally provided by the family and the community migrants left behind, and provide a space for membership recreation, capacity development and awareness raising of their rights (Castillo & Obadiaru, 2012). They help migrants to unite and adapt to the often-complicated living conditions in the host society, supporting them to exercise their 'voice' in their host country as well as their 'loyalty' for their countries of origin (Lamba-Nieves, 2018). Migrant associations can be large and well-established, small and ephemeral, more or less formally structured, with very specific objectives, such as promoting the integration of migrant women in the labor market in a particular city, or with relatively broader objectives, such as promoting the culture of a particular country in the host society.

As such, it is evident that migrant associations have a diverse character. It is also important to recognize that they are dynamic, and these characteristics can change over time (Lamba-Nieves, 2018; Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005). For instance, objectives and their specificity can evolve, as can the formality of the associations' structure and processes.

Developing and managing an association is time-consuming and requires that some members invest substantial time in planning and implementing activities and events, fundraising, and networking with other migrant associations, civil organizations and/or public authorities. Association board members and other volunteers often work beyond normal working hours, after their regular jobs elsewhere. Their involvement is usually without financial compensation, unless the association has developed a stable structure and financial solvency (Castillo & Obadiaru, 2012; Matthey & Stainer, 2009).

Migrant associations normally have limited financial means, with funds generated primarily through activities, donations or membership fees, and sometimes, public

contributions. They also have time limitations, as most active members in charge of managing the association and organizing activities are volunteers, providing in-kind service.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Tensions within and between migrant associations and with civic organizations and authorities***

Tensions and conflicts within and between migrant associations are not uncommon, and similar challenges often arise between these associations and other civil society organizations or authorities. Tension within migrant associations is largely due to power struggles or differences regarding decisions over associations' objectives and activities (Cammozi, 2011) and between migrant associations or with other civic organizations as a result of competition for support from a target population and funding available (Fennema & Tillie, 1999; Odmalm, 2004; Sardinha, 2009; Schover & Vermeulen, 2005; Vermeulen, 2006). Tension between migrant associations and authorities results from migrant mistrust of host country institutions, when political participation and representation to consultative bodies do not give real power to migrant associations, or when migrant associations' citizen engagement performs unpaid tasks that should be the responsibility of local authorities (Mantovan, 2013<sup>5</sup>, Moret & Dahinden, 2009, Vermeulen, 2006). While these sources of tension vary, they are nevertheless important factors to consider for the functioning of migrant associations.

### ***Migrant associations' role on integration: Their commitments and practices in the host society***

Migrant associations play a central role in the settlement process and the integration of migrants into the host society in a several ways, including: membership and services provided to members and others (Kindler *et al.*, 2015); the socialization of migrants in the host society; provision of advice and related support for employment and housing (socio-economic integration); introducing cultural practices specific to the host country (cultural integration); the dissemination of relevant information in relation to migrant rights, and the provision of services for migrants and the institutions that offer those services (political integration).

At the same time, migrant associations facilitate potential active citizenship in the host society through engaged participation within the association, provide networking opportunities with community organizations, and act as a point of contact and coordination between migrants, local government and other institutions (Somerville, Durana, Terrazas, 2008). As Shrover and Vermeulen (2005) point out, even when associations are not notable in activity and influence, they are still relevant for understanding migration and integration processes.

While some scholars (and policymakers) support the positive influence migrant associations have on integration, others claim that migrant associations can hinder the development of personal relationships with host country natives and retard the process of integration<sup>6</sup> given that they are established along ethnic lines (Sardinha, 2009).

Putnam's distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is helpful when considering the dichotomy between positive or negative influences of migrant association on integration (Putnam, 2000). Basically, bonding capital brings together people who are alike, such as family, friends and where 'strong ties' are present Whereas bridging capital brings together people who are different from each other, such as distinct social or ethnic groups, where the ties between them are weak (Kindler, 2015). If the migrant association is a vector of bonding capital exclusively, it might hinder the integration process of its members, isolating

<sup>4</sup> "In kind" refers to goods, services, and transactions not involving money or not measured in monetary terms.

<sup>5</sup> Mantovan, "Cohesion without Participation: Immigration and Migrants' Associations in Italy."

<sup>6</sup> Sardinha uses the term "cultural adaptation."

them from the host society. On the other hand, if the association is a vector of bridging capital, it can support the integration process of its members.

Even more influential than a migrant association's type and degree of social capital, is the degree of support from host societies to migrant associations. According to Schrover and Vermeulen, (2005), in contexts where migrants are seen as 'foreign temporarily residents' and state policy limits its role in integration to legal procedures, migrant association activities are often unwelcome or even perceived as threatening, and consequently banned or strongly controlled. In contrast, in societies that are more receptive and open - 'migrant societies' - migrants are approached as citizens with easier access to nationality, and migrant associations' activities are regarded as helpful in the integration process and very often funded.

As Cordero-Guzman (2005) points out, one of the key challenges for migrant associations is to achieve both the process of integration while at the same time, recognising and preserving their cultural practices. However, migrant associations do not see any contradiction in simultaneously assisting their members with the process of integration in the host society and also preserving the cultural and ethnic identities associated with customs, ethics, traditions and norms. This dual task makes them rather dynamic because they need to integrate and adjust themselves to new cultural practices brought in by new members, and further adhere to the requirements and pressures from the changing environment where they operate.

### ***Migrant associations' homeland engagements: Their commitments and practices in countries of origin***

Most migrant associations are in contact with their countries of origin either sporadically or on a more regular and structured basis. According to Van Ewijk & Nijenhui (2016), they can play a variety of roles such as intermediaries between home and host societies: for lifecycle events, such as marriage, child birth, and funerals; for payments of community taxes back home; for political activism, undertaking advocacy work, affiliating with a political party or participating in political elections; as a charity organization, raising resources to support a specific projects; as professional development organization, carrying out development projects, such as providing short-term aid in the form of disaster relief or through government matching-funds programmes (Munoz & Collazo, 2014); or by stimulating development through knowledge networks, sharing and transfer through highly skilled migrants (Meyer, 2007).

When migrant associations focus on contributing to development in their countries of origin, they usually pool together resources to be invested in basic infrastructure and communication projects. These funds transferred to countries of origin are known as 'collective remittances', and while they are low in number in comparison to individual remittances, they nevertheless are an important source of aid with the potential to impact the quality of life of a wider population than individual recipients of remittances (Orozco, Garcia-Zanello, 2009). It is worth noting that this kind of collective initiatives not only focus on the financial support, but also on collective social remittances which "are exchanged by individuals in their role as organisational members and are used in organisational settings such as hometown associations, church groups or political parties" (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011, p. 13).

In order to increase the impact and sustainability of development projects and programmes, migrant associations often establish partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, or the private sector (Haas *et al.*, 2009), as well as with local informal and formal counterparts, such as family members, local civic society organizations

(e.g. NGOs), or even an organization established by the migrant association, specifically for project implementation (Van Ewijk & Nijenhui, 2016). The engagement with migrants and their associations for development has become an important strategy of many countries of origin. However, as De Haas (2006) points out, it is important for those states, as well as engaging development agencies and other partnering development actors, to create durable alliances with migrant associations. This includes such elements as a joint agenda or strategy to address shared priorities; collaboration with their existing initiatives and joint investment schemes for social and economic projects; strengthening networks and knowledge sharing; providing capacity building and technical assistance for community development and advocacy for human rights, and legal support for justice for community members.

According to Faist and Fauser (2011), the potential of this strategy lies in the role of migrants through migrant associations, their transnational practices and networks, in addition to the NGO's support. However, this potential development role of migrant associations is not without risk because scaling up their role and responsibilities could be 'overwhelming and counterproductive' and undermine their capacity for empowerment. Related, migrant associations often face organizational restraints or weakness (Delgado Wise, 2014) and can be perceived by development agencies and states as mere operators and not as participants in the design and decision-making process (Lacomba & Escala Rabadan, 2013). They support themselves with interventions, but it can be hard to support migrant associations' work with local communities without the local community's ownership towards the proposed projects (Orozco, Garcia-Zanello, 2009). There can also be harmful competition between migrant and non-migrant groups (Lamba-Nieves, 2018). In addition, migrant associations' projects can also be constrained by restrictive migration policies and conditioned international cooperation aiming at controlling migrants' flows (Faist & Fauser, 2011).

Nevertheless, the dual 'presence' of migrant associations in both origin and destination societies gives them a privileged position as they know both realities; while this is not a guarantee for success, it does offer potential for development partnerships if collaboration and implementation are well planned, monitored, and evaluated, with shared responsibility and local ownership.

### **Migrant Associations: Enhancing Migrant Agency and Advancing Social Justice**

Migrant associations play a crucial role in empowering migrants and advancing social justice by offering information or referral for essential services, facilitating integration, advocating for their rights, and fostering social and political participation. Their efforts contribute to strengthening migrant agency, ensuring socio-economic and social inclusion, and improving access to legal protections. Below are the main ways in which migrant associations contribute to enhancing migrant agency and advancing social justice:

#### **Social and Cultural Empowerment**

Migrant associations serve as spaces where migrants can maintain their cultural identity while integrating into the host society. These organizations offer language courses, cultural events, and social activities that help migrants navigate their new environment while preserving their heritage (Cordero-Guzmán, 2005; Kindler et al., 2015). By fostering a sense of belonging, they strengthen the psychological well-being of migrants, reducing isolation and marginalization (Portes et al., 2007). These migrant-led organizations also address social justice by advocating for housing rights and access to social services. Migrants often face barriers to housing and healthcare (Eggert & Pilati, 2014).

The social and cultural empowerment role played by migrant associations can be analyzed in the following key areas:

- **Cultural identity preservation, community building:** Migrant associations provide a sense of belonging and solidarity, helping migrants connect with others from similar backgrounds. These organizations help migrants maintain and celebrate their cultural identity while also promoting intercultural exchange with the host society. This support network reduces isolation and strengthens social cohesion.
- **Access to information and referral for services:** Migrant associations provide vital information about local laws, customs and opportunities, helping migrants navigate their new environments effectively. They often facilitate referrals to essential services such as health, housing, education, and employment.
- **Support for undocumented migrants:** Associations often assist undocumented migrants by providing legal aid, emergency housing, and employment support.

In the UK, the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), an organization that supports Latin American migrant women, many of whom work in precarious, low-wage jobs as cleaners, nannies, or in the hospitality sector, and empowers migrant women by providing safe spaces for gender-based violence survivors, offering language courses, and supporting cultural initiatives. Similarly, in Switzerland, Colombia Vive, a cultural and solidarity-focused association based in Lausanne, Switzerland, promotes Colombian culture and fosters social connections within the Colombian community residing in Switzerland and enhances cultural exchange while advocating for better integration policies for Colombian migrants. Also in Switzerland, Asociación Bolivia 9 and Asociación Cultural Peru, aim to valorise the identity, traditions and culture of their respective country of origin and favour their members' integration process. These associations also support migrants in vulnerable situations by facilitating referrals to relevant authorities or civil society organizations that can provide the necessary services and assistance.

### **Economic Empowerment and Labour Rights Advocacy**

Many migrant associations focus on labor rights advocacy, job training, and economic self-sufficiency. Migrants, especially those in precarious jobs, face exploitation, wage theft, poor working conditions, and high risks to occupational safety and health. These migrant-led organizations also address economic inequalities by advocating for fair labor conditions as migrants often face discrimination in the labor market and exploitation by employers (Eggert & Pilati, 2014).

Research by Eggert and Pilati (2014) highlights that migrant associations often act as intermediaries between workers and employers, helping to establish fair employment conditions. Fennema and Tillie (1999) further argue that associations contribute to migrant economic mobility by creating job networks and skill development programs, increasing their employability in host societies.

Migrant associations' economic empowerment and labour rights advocacy role can be analyzed in the following key areas:

- **Employment support and skills development:** Migrant associations offer job training, career counselling and entrepreneurship programs that enhance employability.

- **Microfinance and business support:** Some associations provide financial assistance, microloans, or business development programs to help migrants start and sustain businesses.
- **Labor rights and fair wages:** Many migrant associations advocate for fair working conditions, protection against labor exploitation, and access to job opportunities for migrants.

In Spain, the Asociación Rumiñahui Hispano-Ecuatoriana, an organization aiming to promote the integration of Latin American migrants in Spain and defend their rights, provides legal assistance on immigration and employment issues, offers training programs to improve employability and professional skills. Similarly, in the UK, the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS) runs employment workshops to help women gain financial independence, as they often face exploitation, gender-based violence and immigration challenges. In Chile, Asociación de Emprendedores Migrantes (ASEM), an organization founded by and for migrants, promotes the economic inclusion of migrant communities through entrepreneurship, facilitating access to small loans and financial resources, offering workshops, mentoring and capacity building programmes focused on business development, financial literacy and digital marketing.

### **Legal and Political Empowerment**

Migrant associations play an essential role in advocating for migrants' legal rights and increasing their political participation. Many associations provide legal aid, guidance on immigration processes (Somerville et al., 2008). These migrant-led organizations serve as key actors in advocating for policy changes and challenging discriminatory laws. By mobilizing communities and engaging in political activism and civic life, these organizations help shape migration policies and legal frameworks that uphold human rights (Morales & Giugni, 2011).

Morales and Giugni (2011) argue that migrant associations contribute to social justice by bridging the gap between migrant communities and political institutions. In societies that embrace multiculturalism and migrant participation, associations serve as mediators, ensuring that migrant perspectives are included in policy-making processes. According to Schrover and Vermeulen (2005), the extent to which migrant associations can influence legal and political frameworks depends on the political opportunity structure of the host country. In countries where migrant organizations are recognized as legitimate political actors, they are more effective in advancing legal protections for migrants.

Migrant associations' legal and political empowerment role can be analyzed in the following key areas:

- **Legal assistance, protection and human rights advocacy:** Many associations provide legal aid services to help migrants with residency, work permits, asylum applications, and other legal matters. They also work to defend migrants' rights, influence migration policies, and challenge discriminatory practices, xenophobia and human rights violations.
- **Empowering migrants as civic and political actors:** Migrant associations encourage political engagement by supporting migrants' voting rights, representation in local governments, and participation in decision-making processes.
- **Grassroots mobilization:** Many migrant associations organize protests, petitions, and community-led initiatives to push for more inclusive policies.



In the United States, Alianza Americas, a network of Latin American and Caribbean migrant-led organizations works to influence immigration policies while providing legal workshops to undocumented migrants. For instance, one notable example is their advocacy for the expansion of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designations in the US. In January 2021, Alianza Americas, alongside other organizations, met with U.S. Representative Darren Soto (D-FL) and Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA) to discuss expanding TPS for individuals from countries experiencing crises, such as Haiti, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Ecuador. This advocacy contributed to policy discussions and decisions regarding TPS designations. The network organization has developed the toolkit “Know Your Rights”, elaborated by its member organizations and allies in their fight for migrant rights to help keep their communities informed and protected.

### **Social Capital, Community Building and Solidarity**

Migrant associations also empower individuals by creating strong community networks that facilitate both bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). Cederberg (2012) highlights the role of migrant associations in creating both bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding capital strengthens internal community ties, while bridging capital fosters connections with the wider society, facilitating integration and reducing discrimination. Migrant associations that successfully engage in both forms of capital-building contribute to social cohesion and justice.

Migrant associations contribute to social justice by fostering community solidarity and mutual aid, which are essential for reducing marginalization and exclusion. Through networks of support, migrants gain access to resources, information, and protection against discrimination (Putnam, 2000). A study by Kindler et al. (2015) emphasizes that associations that engage in bridging capital activities—such as policy advocacy, intercultural dialogue, and networking with local institutions—are more effective in supporting long-term integration and empowerment.

Migrant associations’ social capital, community building and solidarity role can be analyzed in the following key areas:

- Bridging migrant and host communities: Migrant associations foster dialogue and cooperation between migrants and local populations, reducing stereotypes and promoting mutual understanding while fostering their integration.
- Collaboration with relevant actors: They serve as intermediaries between migrants and government agencies, NGOs, and other support networks.

In Switzerland, the Asociación Colombia Vive play a bridge role between the Colombian and other Latin American migrants and the Swiss society, providing information to their members about how to navigate the Swiss administrative, cultural, political and economic realities. In Spain, Fedelatina, a federation of Latin American migrant associations, promotes equal rights through policy advocacy, anti-discrimination initiatives, and cultural programs that foster integration into Spanish society. In addition, it facilitates collaboration between migrant communities and Spanish institutions to improve access to education, healthcare, and legal rights.

### **Humanitarian support and crisis response**

During crises, migrant associations play a vital role in providing humanitarian aid, ensuring that vulnerable migrants receive the necessary support to survive and rebuild their lives. Their efforts are particularly important in contexts where state support is inadequate or

inaccessible to migrants (Lacroix, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrant-led organizations stepped up to provide food aid, medical services, and financial assistance to undocumented migrants who were excluded from government support programs.

According to Sardinha (2009), migrant associations that engage in humanitarian work not only address immediate needs but also contribute to long-term social justice by advocating for systemic changes that protect vulnerable populations.

Migrant associations' humanitarian support and crisis response roles can be analyzed in the following key areas:

- **Emergency relief and assistance:** Migrant associations play a critical role during crises (e.g., natural disasters, economic downturns, or public health emergencies) by providing food aid, shelter, and medical support to vulnerable migrant populations.
- **Mental health and well-being:** Many associations offer counseling, community support groups, and wellness programs to help migrants cope with trauma, discrimination, and social isolation.

In Spain, the Asociación Por Ti Mujer—a non-profit organization based in Valencia—works to address the structural barriers that limit the full citizenship and rights of migrant women, particularly those who are survivors of gender-based violence or at risk of psychosocial exclusion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the organization provided crucial mental health support to migrant women, helping them navigate heightened vulnerabilities during the crisis. (Tutistar, Muñoz. & Polo, 2022)

### **Conclusions**

Migrant associations play a pivotal role in enhancing migrant agency and advancing social justice. By fostering social inclusion, advocating for human and labor rights, providing legal assistance, and facilitating political participation, these organizations empower migrants to navigate structural barriers and claim their rights. Their efforts not only mitigate economic vulnerabilities, legal insecurities, and social exclusion but also contribute to the broader goal of building more equitable and inclusive societies.

Beyond individual empowerment, migrant associations drive systemic change by aligning their advocacy efforts with key social justice principles, including non-discrimination, equality of treatment, equity, recognition, and participation. Rather than functioning solely as service providers, these organizations enable migrants to become active agents in shaping their communities. Through education programs, employment support, and legal aid, they enhance migrants' capabilities and facilitate their full participation in society. Moreover, by challenging discriminatory policies and practices, migrant associations promote greater equity and inclusion within host communities.

The study of migrant associations is inherently multifaceted, encompassing their contributions to integration, social capital formation, and transnational engagement. As catalysts for both individual and collective empowerment, these organizations strengthen social networks, preserve cultural heritage, and foster solidarity among migrant communities. However, their ability to sustain and expand their initiatives is often constrained by limited funding and institutional support, which presents a significant challenge to their long-term impact.

Despite these challenges, migrant associations remain fundamental in advocating for migrants' rights and supporting their integration into host societies. Their work underscores the need for policy frameworks that recognize and collaborate with migrant-led organizations to ensure more inclusive and just societies. As migration continues to shape global landscapes, the role of migrant associations in empowering individuals, fostering social cohesion, and driving systemic change will remain indispensable.

Future research should further examine the innovative strategies that migrant associations employ to navigate financial and institutional constraints, as well as explore how these organizations can enhance their impact across diverse sociopolitical contexts. Ultimately, migrant associations are not only vital for enhancing migrant agency but also for advancing broader struggles for social justice, equity, and human rights.

### Acknowledgements

The author sincerely appreciates Global Migration Policy Associates (GMPA) for the invitation to contribute to this RTE special section on social justice. A special thanks to Patrick Taran, GMPA President, for his invaluable insights and our enriching conversations on the significance of this topic.

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