Ecologies of Immateriality

Remittances and the Cashless Allure

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Introduction

A 'kill cash' sentiment was widespread among the participants at a 'Mobile Money for the Unbanked' workshop that I attended in Nairobi in 2013. It was organized by the Global System for Mobile Communications Association (GSMA) and included representatives from a range of international organizations, start-up tech companies, government central banks and telecommunication operators. Halfway through the first decade of 'mobile money' (Rea and Nelms 2017), the event was held in Kenya in part to highlight the success of M-Pesa, a remittance service through which even those without bank accounts can use their mobile phones to deposit, transfer and withdraw value for a small fee. Run by Kenya's Safaricom, M-Pesa demonstrated the benefits of government-industry cooperation in that it enabled users to bypass banks by allowing the telecommunication firms to cash in and cash out money. Introduced in 2007, Safari-com's M-Pesa-related services have since grown to include a range of other offerings, from loans to payments, tied to an emerging industry goal of never having to cash out one's original monetary deposit. The value stored in the mobile money account can be connected to options to pay electricity

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bills, buy groceries or insurance, apply for micro-loans and even play games. By promoting a 'cashless ecology', companies intended to reduce the burden of having to deal with the inevitable liquidity shortfalls that result when the majority of deposits are made in cities but most withdrawals are in the countryside. They also benefit from profit made from small fees for transfer and payment services. And from a development practitioner perspective, mobile money services, in expanding this ecology of interlinked and operable services, effectively worked as an on-ramp to banking (Rea and Nelms 2017).

The celebration of M-Pesa at the Nairobi unbanked workshop reveals a significantly shifting policy landscape when it comes to remittances. Remittances—those ubiquitous monies sent by migrants to families and home communities—have captured the poverty-alleviating imaginations of a generation of development economists. Changing calculation mechanisms have sought to highlight the significance in particular of cross-border migrant worker financial flows, resulting in notable annual quantitative increases since the turn of the twenty-first century (IMF 2009). In the process, private value transfers have, in many ways, become public goods. As anthropologists Hernandez and Coutin (2006) point out, development discourses surrounding issues of remittances and migrants often become a governance process of 'responsible subject making', where states put the burden of development on migrants and 'discount' the accrued social costs of migration rather than administering more effective policies to produce sustainable economic livelihoods for their populations—hence the visibility of remittances as a thing that can be named, facilitated and directed by development practitioners.

This chapter examines how 'remittances', as an issue of development intervention, has shifted over the last decade and a half. This includes a turn in policy attention from international to domestic remittances and also

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to the emergence of 'cashlessness' as a mode of remittance transfer. Cashlessness, although conceptually and practically recognized as generally preferable by migrants as well as migration policy makers, has been harnessed as an issue by the latter and evolved in its definition to represent a particular type of financial technology solution requiring intervention and oversight.

Visualizing Remittances

Maimbo and Ratha's book, *Remittances: Development Impact and Future Prospects* (2005), was one of the early studies that enthusiastically highlighted the quantities of informal aid sent by migrants to home communities. The authors celebrated the 'recent revival in interest in migrant remittances' due to the 'sheer size these flows have acquired', second only to foreign direct investment and higher than overseas development assistance. Since then, the general assumption among development practitioners has been that with the right guidance and incentives, remittance recipients can become primary agents for reducing poverty in their own lives and communities. Economists Adams and Page (2005) estimate that a 10 per cent increase in remittances can reduce poverty in the receiving country by 3.5 per cent. These kinds of predictive impact models are in high demand in policy research circles.

In 2017, the World Bank estimated that over 600 billion dollars cross international borders each year in migrant transfers, well over four times the amount estimated by Ratha and Maimbo just ten years before.

And yet, while remittances have become visible as a tangible action issue for policy makers, in other ways they are also becoming less so. For one, attention to the development potential for remittances is increasingly turning towards domestic remittances (Binci and Gianelli

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2016; Rahman, Bari and Sayeda 2015; Technoserve/Visa 2016), which, due to the internal state nature of their primarily urban-rural flows, cannot be as easily tracked as cross-international border flows. International remittances are recorded by central banks or at least can be roughly calculated based on GDP growth surpluses or deficits. For example, in Vietnam, one of the top international remittance recipient countries, household surveys have revealed that while international remittances reach a bit less than 10 per cent of households, well over 80 per cent actually receive some form of domestic remittance transfer (Pfau and Long 2009). The latter therefore emerges as a more significant indicator that has called for a refocus of policy attention. But also notable within the policy awareness shift from international to domestic remittances is where attention has focused on the *medium* of remittance transfer.

In a domestic framework, financial as well as material value transfers are more easily portable within state borders and do not face the regulatory scrutiny of international remittances. This scrutiny includes fears of money laundering and terrorist financing, which have dominated international financial policies and created regulatory barriers to transfers. To confirm this phenomenon, one only has to observe the long-distance buses across many countries in the global South, from Vietnam to Mexico, where package delivery frequently coincides with passenger transportation services as business incentives for coach operators. Frequently they go together: migrants returning from the city to country carry material goods purchased in the city—from water faucets and pots and pans to televisions, microwave ovens, generators and even motorcycles—as forms of material value that can be put to practical use or reconverted to financial value through market exchange. Value arbitrage of this kind is a common form of material remittance flow among domestic corridors. As one man transporting goods from Danang

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Vietnam to his central coastal hometown once explained to me, 'My family needs these products from the city, so it is better to buy and carry them with me rather than just bringing cash when I return home.' But of course many migrants who are personally transferring items of material value back to home communities also often carry cash on their bodies, reflecting diversified value transfer strategies.

Despite the obvious and widespread material value transfers by migrants from cities to country, it has been the visibility and, by extension, the assumed risk of cash that has received the most attention from the financial inclusion world, revealing what James Ferguson might describe as a kind of development " 'problem' that requires the 'solution' they are there to provide" (1994, 70). In a Reboot publication on financial service design by Lee, Ainslie and Fathallah (2013), for example, the authors focus on monetary rather than material remittances in describing the plight of an informant picked for their China study:

> Zhang Qi was waiting to buy tickets for his day-long ride home to Anhui Province when he got into a tussle with another man. There were thousands of migrants jostling for tickets at the Beijing Railway Station; in a flash, someone thrust a knife into his jacket, ripping it open and grabbing a thick stack of RMB notes out of his pocket. It was more than RMB 5,000 (USD 775)—his entire years' savings. Before he realized what was happening, it was too late. Later, as he replayed the incident over and over in his mind, he realized that the thieves must have known which pocket to go for because he'd been touching it repeatedly, nervously anticipating his long ride home. Zhang Qi was devastated and blamed himself. The police at the railway station were no help. His money gone, Zhang Qi traveled home to face the shame of not bringing any money. He's working to save RMB 75,000 (USD 11,600) for each of his two sons, who are still in primary school, so they can one day build homes. At his current rate of earnings, it will

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> take him approximately 30 years to save up enough, and now he's one year behind. (68)

And thus the need for technological design innovations for remittance services, particularly targeted to un- or barely banked migrants like Zhang Qi, which offer the benefit of dematerialized value that cannot be easily and physically stolen. No matter that Zhang Qi's train was most likely full of migrants also carrying, from my own observations of trains and buses while working in China, material goods of value that would be more difficult to rob. Rather, it is precisely the cash risk issue that a development intervention can address. This is where financial inclusion advocates have come to embrace the cashless mantra for the global South. And yet, as Janaki Srinivasan notes,

> Time and again, we have seen that the design of technologies (and policies) starts by identifying a problem and solutions that are assumed to be desirable (cashlessness), and a vision that is neutral and unproblematic on the surface . . . without consulting its diverse potential users. . . . It is perhaps time to explore in parallel how 'desirable' solutions get constructed in the first place and on whose interests and experiences of desirability these are based. (Dalinghaus 2018: 47)

Conceptualizing Cashlessness and Fintech Emergences

The cashless-financial technology nexus has been widespread in development circles for some time. In the last decade, proposals have focused on the potentials of the cellular phone—not just smartphones but also basic 'dumb' phones that are more affordable to the poor. In 2008, development economist Jeffrey Sachs identified the cell phone as 'the single most transformative technology

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for development'. In the decade since then, 'mobile', phone-based 'money' (MM) has been a central focus for development practitioners seeking cashless transfer solutions. The United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) hails 'digital finance' as the 'gateway to financial inclusion'. The Better Than Cash Alliance, based out of the United Nations, defines itself as 'a partnership of governments, companies and international organizations that accelerates the transition from cash to digital payments in order to reduce poverty and drive inclusive growth'. An analysis of its partners reveals a unique assortment of bedfellows, including nonprofits such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Omidyar Network—a 'self styled philanthropic investment firm'—and for-profit companies such as Mastercard and Visa. Their diverse interests have all come in various ways to collude around developing a cashless ecology in the form of MM in which value moves within a contained payment ecosystem so as to ideally never have to be cashed out in material form.

From Nairobi to Singapore to New York, the notion of 'ecologies of cashlessness' came up frequently in industry and development policy discussions that I participated in as a researcher between 2012 and 2017. What exactly are the contours of this cashless ecosystem, and why has it found support across such a diverse group of nonprofit and for-profit stakeholders when it comes to remittances? Mobile money, the primary model of cashlessness in the global South, appears to hold promise as an effective and accessible tool of financial inclusion for the poor. However, it also reveals that the poor have always, in fact, managed diverse forms of value and that there is a market to be tapped if one looks to the many other ways the traditionally financially excluded are also economic actors in their own right (Rutherford and Arora 2009). For this reason, industry designers, government regulators and development practitioners have all been interested in learning more about the needs of the largely unbanked—the

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so-called bottom billion, in financial-inclusion speak—and how and why uptake and participation in MM ecologies happen. As one industry representative put it at a Mobile Money for Development conference in New York in 2014, 'we have the technology but we need to stoop down and meet our customers, get them to use our mobile wallets and then connect everything to them so that they never cash out . . . we're on a long path towards total global interoperability'.

This emerging interoperable infrastructure of cashlessness has practical and sociocultural consequences for those 'stooped down to' users of MM services. Much of the industry and development research on MM is premised on a user-uptake approach: how to effectively model the cashless benefits introduced by MM to new and emerging markets. Mobile money, similar to the remittances they technically channel, has become a silver-bullet solution to poverty and urban/rural inequalities and mobilities for the majority of applied researchers studying the potentials for cashless futures in the global South. The widely accepted doctrine has been that with access to mobile phones and accompanying technologies to transfer, save and borrow digital values, poor people will be able to effectively transform their lives. This is assumed to be true whether MM operates in Cameroon, Colombia or Cambodia. And yet an emerging field of para-ethnographic social science research collaborations investigating how people manage MM systems—including the ways they intersect and overlap with other modes of value management, saving, borrowing and payment—is showing us that MM as a straightforward cashless technology for financial inclusion is actually a rather complex issue (IMTFI 2020). At a basic level, the complexity is seen in the difficulty of assembling the right combinations of product design, regulatory frameworks and mobile network infrastructure and agents in order to create a MM system that effectively operates and provides financial services. But more

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importantly, new research on MM practices from around the world illustrate that local repertoires of money management significantly shape the ways users relate to the introduction of MM technologies and systems designed to promote cash-lite or cashless societies. A study by Eric Osei-Assibey (2014) looks at Ghana, asking why MM in that country has not taken off to the same extent it has in Kenya. Why do people in two countries with similar MM infrastructures respond to them differently? Osei-Assibey finds that using MM as a function for savings has not yet mapped on to local *Susu* savings practices in Ghana in which collectors physically travel from household to household to collect money for personal and collective savings schemes. Here, the physical presence of the cash collector cannot be matched by the digital anonymity of MM, which, he argues, accounts for the low levels of adoption of the new technology. Yet while local monetary repertoires may shape uptake patterns, it is also true that the introduction of dematerialized MM technologies can affect and reorient sociocultural notions of value and exchange, sometimes in ways that are not always obvious at first but can have a variety of impacts and unintended consequences (Greeley 2013).

Extending Mobile Money Horizons

Mobile money has been heralded for its promises of financial inclusion and the allure of a cashless horizon, but in actuality, its adoption has been uneven across different countries, regions and communities. To understand why that is, one must continually look at how context matters, and how technical, legal, physical *and* social infrastructures (Elyachar 2011) come together in particular ways to reflect and produce existing and emergent forms of exchange and value recognition. Southeast Asia is a region of the global South where the allure of cashless

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remittances has been abuzz. Mobile money has been widespread since the mid-2000s in the Philippines with G-Cash and the promotion of cashless technologies in the development arena (GSMA 2012; Gusto and Roque 2018). It is also being actively explored in countries like Laos, where the use of cell phones has been central to borderlands arbitrage practices (Huijsmans and Tran 2015; UNDP n.d.); Cambodia, where the technology may allow users to bypass financial intermediaries in isolated rural areas (Fang, Russell and Singh 2014) and Myanmar, where political changes have brought dramatic telecommunications transformations (Tay 2014). In Vietnam, mobile value remittance practices that promote cashlessness are starting to emerge. Mobile penetration in Vietnam is 130 per cent—in other words, 1.3 mobile phones on average per person (Tellez 2011). In recent years, users within the same telecommunications provider network have been able to transfer airtime credit domestically via phone. There has also been experimentation with electronic kiosks, where users can deposit money and input a phone number to which the credit will be sent. Some companies like Momo have moved from airtime credit transfer to mobile wallet and e-payment services, reflecting the general trend in cashless ecology promotion.

The Vietnam Bank for Social Policies, in partnership with Mastercard and the Asia Foundation, ran a feasibility study and implemented a pilot project for mobile banking in that country in 2014, clarifying the technological and banking potential but remaining vague on the specifics of regulatory support for MM. Here we see the limits of MM modeling. Kenya's M-Pesa success story, after all, is more than a technological innovation. It is also a regulatory alliance between central banks and telecommunications companies that essentially allows telecom operators to act as banks to cash money in and out for customers. The particular arrangement that made M-Pesa successful in Kenya limits it as a replicable model, especially given

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the international frameworks that pressure central banks to maintain strict oversight over money laundering. While the range of payment options within mobile value ecosystems is rapidly expanding in Vietnam, from games to bills and transport payments for ride-share services such as Grab, in the end there is not yet a way to cash out such credit person-to-person (p2p) without a bank account, remaining a barrier in a country where more than half the population remains unbanked (World Bank). Nonetheless, the Vietnamese government continues to advance policies to promote greater cashlessness, with 2020 as its arrival goal (Vietnam News 2017). In January 2020, Vietnam's minister of information and communication, Nguyen Manh Hung, made further commitments to trial MM licenses, admitting that regulatory barriers were impeding innovation but that MM offered a promising pathway to 'accelerate non-cash payments' among the unbanked poor. Again repeating the general discourse around this particular fintech solution, he stated that 'mobile money will train people, and turn them into banks'clients' (Vietnam Ministry of Information and Communications 2020), and MM payments should therefore not be viewed as a threat to the formal banking sector. It remains to be seen how the contours of Vietnam's cashless agenda play out, but the state continues to commit itself to an increasingly digital economy, and many tech start-ups are jockeying for an anticipated place in it, a pattern that is growing across the region.

Conclusion

In this article, I have considered how the shift in attention from international to domestic remittances has brought new challenges for development policymakers' capacities to visualize and manage the specific contours of their moving poverty reduction target. Domestic remittances

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are more difficult to track than international ones and can take a broader and more creative variety of material forms that often elude easy categorization and quantification. In the drive to visualize the new focus of the remittance landscape as it relates to urban-rural transfers, analysts tend to overlook what is most immediate—those very material practices in which migrants arbitrage and transport material value on a bus or train or truck. The risk of transporting physical cash from one locale to another is real but also recognized by many migrants, and thus, transporting material goods is itself a cashless solution to remittance transfers. When it comes to this commonplace practice, however, there is not much that development practitioners can contribute and little money to be made by the financial industry that it bypasses. Financial inclusion advocates have turned instead to what they can more simply, quantitatively and tangibly grasp as a value concept—money. They then dress it up with what they can add—namely, technology—while often downplaying the more challenging regulatory accompaniments that are required to make MM work. This extends to recent attempts to introduce blockchain technology, from Bitcoin to Ripple, as yet another solution to easing remittance transfers. In doing so, monetary remittances become a reformed target of intervention as banks, money transfer operators, the telecommunications industry, NGOs and a variety of other stakeholders attempt to ironically 'cash in' on and aid the until recently invisible unbanked 'bottom billion', bringing them back into the domain of institutional surveillance and management via their brokerage.

Cashlessness through digital value transfer technologies has been the latest tool in the ongoing quest for financial inclusion. Mobile money appears as a ready cashless solution to what has been presented as a cash risk problem. By encouraging a utilitarian turn away from the most recognizable form of value—cash—to digital finance

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ecologies through technology while also ignoring existing alternative material remittance practices, the array of for- and nonprofit interests that are promoting MM in the global South are once again, as they have done with international remittances, making migrant value transfers a visible and, hence, governable policy issue. The construction of this particular cash problem and subsequent cashless solution is entangled with business agendas that scale far beyond the 'poor' users such services are intended to benefit. In doing so, they illuminate and tap financial and gift flows across transnational and now domestic kinship networks that once remained largely below the radar of inputs that format the formal economy (Callon 1998). These so-called informal economic systems are adapting, but they also reflect long-standing and diversified financial strategies that exceed singular value transmission solutions. As Ursula Dalinghaus has pointed out, 'poor and marginalized individuals and communities who are (or have been) excluded from the formal financial system depend on cash *and* alternative payment arrangements to make their livelihoods, save and invest, and support family members through remittances' (2018: 34).

As the informal and formal economic 'sectors' become increasingly merged and visualized, remittance transfers are being further capitalized upon—in all of their forms, with 'cashlessness' as the new mantra. Mobile money is now the latest intervention promoted by the new constellation of intermediaries who seek to track, govern and extract value from migrants and the hard-earned fruits of their labours. While MM undoubtedly offers benefits for domestic migrants, one must also be cognizant of the interests of those stakeholders promoting it as a macroscopic and portable silver-bullet solution, especially when a burgeoning collection of localized ethnographic studies offer growing proof that the mobile money bullet is not always shiny silver . . . nor the only solution.

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