

Diasporas and Collective Remittances: From State-Driven to Unofficial Forms of Diaspora Engagement

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Abstract: This article advances understandings of collective remittances practices by elaborating on the case of the Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands. It argues that the collection, management, and distribution of collective remittances are crucial aspects of how diasporic immigrant groups function. Hence, collective remittances represent a lens through which to analyze a diaspora's internal life, gender differences and tensions, relations with the origin state or homeland, and connections to other relevant institutions. Furthermore, the article brings three new insights to diaspora studies. First, it demonstrates how practices connected to the collection and sending of collective remittances reflect the internal dynamics of diasporic migrations and diaspora-homeland relations. Second, the article unpacks the concept of collective remittances itself, classifying it into three categories: collective remittances initiated from above, with a state-driven character; collective remittances organized by transnational non-state institutions, such as religious institutions and pan-diasporic organizations; and collective remittances initiated from below, organized by migrants and local networks of diaspora members. Third, this article highlights women's roles in organizing alternative forms of collective remittances, from external to official channels. The qualitative examination of collective remittances presented here supplies a new vision of collective remittances in which informal and hidden aspects, gender roles, forms of reciprocity, and creation and circulation of trust are highlighted.

Introduction

Migrant remittances – transfers of money or other goods from emigrants to people (usually family members or other relatives) in their homeland - are a paramount feature of transnational migrations (Connell and Brown 2015). They represent a “currency of care” (Singh, Cabraal, and Robertson 2010) embedded in family and household relations (Åkesson 2011; Boccagni 2013) and conditioned by complex moral economies (Katigbag 2015; Solari 2018). Since the mid-1990s, according to Goldring (2004), the term “collective remittances” has been used to describe migrant organizations’ (also referred to in the United States as hometown associations) efforts to collect funds for financing various projects in their origin communities, both with and without government matching funds. Collective remittances are, thus, defined as monetary transfers which go beyond family ties and are collected and sent by migrant groups to benefit a group or community in the homeland, or occasionally other countries, through which a diaspora’s members and associations feel a common belonging (Lacroix 2016; Vertovec 2004; Goldring 2004). Collective remittances represent a typical endeavor of diasporic groups which maintain cultural, emotional, and political links with a homeland (Tölölyan 2012).

Studies of collective remittances have predominantly focused on diasporas’ governmentality perspectives, examining state-driven forms of policies and programs that encourage diaspora contributions (Ragazzi 2014; Kuznetsov 2006). Recently, this field of scholarship has been enriched by research on non-public institutions, mainly religious organizations, that act as alternatives to state-driven forms of collective remittances (Brinkerhoff 2016; Garbin 2019). Fewer efforts, however, have been made to unpack collective remittances that do not rely on formal organizational structures, although a number of authors have recorded informality behind

collective actions (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009; Orozco and Lapointe 2004; Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010; Lacroix 2016).

This article adds to collective remittances scholarship in three ways: first, by challenging state-centric perspectives on diasporas' collective remittances practices and analyzing different forms of collective remittances, especially semi-formal and informal collective remittances; second, by studying the social aspects of the collection of collective remittances in diasporic communities; and third, by highlighting women's roles in organizing alternative forms of collective remittances, from external to official channels. Our main argument is that the collection, management, and distribution of collective remittances are crucial aspects of how diasporic immigrant groups function. Through the lens of collective remittances, this article deepens understandings of gender assignments within diasporas, diasporas' relations with the origin state or homeland, and diasporas' connections with other relevant institutions. We discuss collective remittances in the framework of small, temporary, often-informal charity initiatives, as well as regular participation in large-scale pan-diasporic initiatives. In doing so, this article extends understandings of the social aspects of diasporas by placing collective remittances in the wider diaspora-homeland context and offers insight on collective remitting practices, with a special focus on brokers and the multiple actors and channels involved in facilitating collective remitting mechanisms. Furthermore, it focuses on understudied aspects of collective remittances such as "reverse remittances" (Mazzucato 2011; Boccagni 2015), the role of religious organizations, and "semi-collective" forms of remittances as in-between categories of individual and collective remittances.

Without delving into the long debate on the definition of diaspora, this article utilizes the term "diaspora" to describe a project that aims at reaching increased levels of "groupness," solidarity, and cultural identification among people residing abroad and sharing the same ethnic

background and/or memory of a common belonging (Brubaker 2004; Cohen 2008; Tölölyan 2000). It discusses the “Dutch-Armenian diaspora” but also acknowledges that “diaspora” or “diasporic community” does not exist as a bounded or static group. Instead, diasporas are imagined and established by political leaders, intellectuals, and organizers who manage to involve people sharing the same ethnic or national background in a common endeavor (Brubaker 2005). We define diaspora as a social, cultural, and political activity developed by diasporic leaders and institutions to mobilize individual migrants, or people with an immigrant background, who share a common origin of belonging (an actual or imagined homeland). Following Brubaker’s (2005) perspective, we look at diaspora as a category of practice and at the formation of a diasporic community as an outcome of mobilization processes that are developed in various ways by political leaders and intellectuals. By focusing on the Dutch-Armenian diaspora, we suggest that it is important to grasp the experiences of diasporas not only in destination countries where the diasporic group has a long history of settlement, large numbers, and well-established organizations but also in countries where their presence is more recent, they have smaller numbers, and they are less organized. Dutch-Armenians diasporic group lives in mostly difficult socio-economic conditions, has modest financial potential, and is not supported by relevant diasporic institutions. However, these individuals feel compelled to collect collective remittances to provide for various needs of their homeland.

To develop these ideas, we, first, review the literature on collective remittances with some references to the literature on individual remittances. The next section details the article’s methodological background. Following a brief discussion of the development of the Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands, we present the subjective interpretations of Armenian diaspora members regarding their community’s collective remittance capacity. Next, we analyze this

group's collective remittance practices, which we aggregate into three categories: remittances from above; remittances organized by transnational non-state actors; and remittances from below, where the role of women and tensions in gender relations are analyzed. Overall, we discuss how the study of collective remittances allows a deeper understanding of several aspects, especially hidden or unofficial, of the functioning of migrant diasporic groups.

Diasporas and the “Black Box” of Collective Remittances

There is growing recognition of financial contributions to the homeland as a key aspect of diaspora commitment (Sheffer 2007; Werbner 2002; Gamlen 2014; De Haas 2006). Tölölyan (2012), for example, finds that organized, institutionally mobilized, and sustained connections that combine material and cultural exchange among diasporic groups, as well as between the diaspora and the homeland, are key components of a specifically “diasporic” social formation. In this framework, collective remittances- monetary transfers which go beyond family ties- have been predominantly conceived as initiatives driven by the interests of states or international organizations that treat migrants as actors that can collectively contribute to their homelands’ development (Van Hear, Pieke, and Vertovec 2004; Sinatti and Horst 2015; Minto-Coy and Séraphin 2017; Ambrosini 2014). Thus, this scholarship has been mainly associated with the study of formal and organized remittances coming from formal and organized associations in well-established diasporic communities (Gamlen, Cummings, and Vaaler 2019; Orozco 2005; Burgess 2012; Vezzoli and Lacroix 2010; Agrawal et al. 2011). Although several authors have underlined the heterogeneity of diasporas and agree that individuals and groups can shape their own agendas to connect with their homeland, rather than simply respond to governments’ appeals (Sinatti and Horst 2015; Newland and Patrick 2004; De Haas 2006), practices initiated

at a more informal level remain largely unnoticed in academic discussions.

This state-centric perspective on collective remittances has been partly challenged through the examination of religious institutions' transnational connections (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, and Molli 2021). Garbin (2019), for example, describes money remitted to religious institutions as “sacred remittances,” while Brinkerhoff (2019) finds, in the case of Egyptian Copts, that religious authorities can significantly contribute to the diaspora's decision to remit and to motivate non-Church-based charities to work with the Coptic Church. The Coptic Church is an important mobilizing force for this diaspora, due to strong trust and affiliation of Egyptian Copts with religious institutions, given that direct links between many Copts and their homeland has been lost over generations (Brinkerhoff 2019).

Fewer efforts, however, have been made to study *informal* collective remittances that do not rely on formal organizational structures (Mazzucato and Kabki 2009; Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010; Lacroix 2016). In these situations of informal collective remittances, both senders and receivers avoid formal channels, due to fear of attention from the authorities and their attempts to control remittances channels, as well as political tensions, mistrust of government authorities, and fear of taxation (Pieke, Van Hear, and Lindley 2007; Timberg 2003). The few studies that have looked at less formal collective remitting practices (El-Said and Harrigan 2009; Abdel-Samad and Flanigan 2019) have identified that trust built through diaspora networks is an advantage for collective remittances. Trust contributes to the development of a reciprocal, dependable relationship between senders and receivers that rely on informal rewards, informal sanctions, and informal social accountability mechanisms (Portes 1995). Trust between senders and receivers helps diasporas identify needs and beneficiaries and allows the delivery of material and immaterial goods in countries with weak financial systems or in conflict (Flanigan

2018; Brinkerhoff 2008, 2019; Agrawal et al. 2011; Johnson 2007; Newland and Patrick 2004).

When explaining diasporic commitment, however, scholars underline not only altruistic reasons of diasporic obligation but also the social bonds that accompany commitment to collective remittances. In this regard, King, Mata-Codesal, and Vullnetari (2013) use the term “black box of remittances” to highlight the need to investigate what drives remittance choices. Going in this direction, Goldring (2004) and Lacroix (2016) suggest that collective remittances may provide social capital and political links for diaspora members to a homeland’s government, while Marini (2012) adds that collective remittances may also provide pathways for making membership claims to a homeland. Additional studies of remittances have tried to highlight the social aspects of money that migrants send to families back home (e.g., Carling, 2014; Biggart and Castanias 2001). Perhaps most famously, Levitt (1998) coined the concept of “social remittances,” meaning ideas, social practices, and social capital conveyed by emigrants to their sending communities. Levitt (2016) later widened her definition of social remittances to examine whom remittances reach, whom they do and do not privilege, and who wins and loses as a result of social remittances. Carling (2014, 219) argued that economic remittances have various social implications as well and should be seen as “compound transactions with material, emotional, and relational elements.” As he suggested, migrant remittances reflect commitments, priorities, and perceptions of needs and worthiness, define the relationships between senders and recipients, and elicit particular feelings surrounding the transactions. Other authors refer to migrants’ money as a “special money” to highlight the non-monetary aspects of economic transactions: beyond money, remittances transmit affection, belonging, recognition of moral obligations, and attachments (Paerregaard 2015; Singh and Cabraal 2013). Although these studies refer to individual and family remittances, they also help us understand the drivers of collective

remittances, including attachment to a place, moral obligations toward what is conceived as a “homeland,” accumulation of social capital, and the desire to return to a homeland.

A stream of scholarship on remittances’ social aspects has analyzed the gender dynamics of individual remittances and women’s role in the production of remittances (Kunz 2008; Rahman 2013; Ambrosini 2014). As this work shows, gender relations can shape remittances’ usage, benefits, and long-term effects, and those remittances, in turn, contribute to reshaping gender relations in the homeland (Van Naerssen et al. 2015; Pandey 2021). De Winter (2016) argues, for example, that gendered power structures are exacerbated for women in migrant organizations, especially when financial control rests with men. Nevertheless, studies on diaspora remittances have largely failed to engage gender (Rashid 2019; de Winter 2016). We fill this void by discussing how “official” forms of collective remittances are gendered, particularly vis-à-vis leadership and political management, and by highlighting women’s role in collecting and sending collective remittances in alternative and informal ways.

The study of collective remittances must be complemented with a look at reverse remittances, or the material, emotive, and symbolic resources that flow from home communities to migrants abroad (Mazzucato 2011; Boccagni 2013; Yeboah, Boamah, and Appai 2019). Reverse remittances take the form of gifts¹ and symbolic objects, such as popular products from the homeland, photographs of children, or religious images, but can also encompass childcare, eldercare, and the monitoring of immigrants’ properties and investments (Mazzucato 2011; Ambrosini 2013). Reverse remittances have mainly been studied in the context of individual

¹Reverse remittances are related to gifts but go beyond the well-established anthropology of gift and reciprocity in Mauss’s (1967) classical terms.

remittances (Palash and Baby-Collin 2019; Adiku and Anamzoya 2016), but they also help shape the reciprocity of diaspora-homeland relations. The study of reverse remittances entails examining whether members of diasporic groups obtain some reward by engaging in the production of collective remittances and what this reward encompasses.

Research Methodology

Data for this article are based on a qualitative study conducted among the Armenian diasporic community in the Netherlands from April 2016 to January 2018. Qualitative methodology was applied to grasp feelings, meanings, and nuances associated with remitting preferences (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault 2015). The qualitative approach entailed looking beyond formal diaspora policies and agendas, studying less formal forms of collective remittances, and providing insight on the relationships between intra-diaspora dynamics and preferences on remitting channels. The Dutch-Armenian diaspora² is not well-established in Dutch society; thus, a study of this group may show dynamics and practices quite different from patterns associated with the Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese immigrant groups that are well-established and well-researched in the Netherlands (Nijenhuis and Zummer 2015; Imani Giglou, d’Haenens and Van Gorp 2019; Geurts, Davids and Spiering 2021).

² As already suggested, we utilize the term “diaspora” and “diasporic community” to refer to people and groups who identify themselves as Armenians, who are involved in activities promoted by Armenian associations or institutions in the Netherlands, and who take (some) part in either formal or informal diasporic projects, including the collection of collective remittances.

The research discussed in this article included key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis. We interviewed 13 key informants from the Armenian diasporic networks in the Netherlands, such as heads of diaspora organizations, to capture the diaspora's "official voices" on various stances related to remitting priorities. We selected the main religious organizations (e.g., the Armenian Apostolic Church)³ and social and political transnational organizations (e.g., Armenian General Benevolent Union,⁴ Armenian Revolutionary Federation⁵) for the research. To have a well-rounded understanding of how non-elites in the diaspora interpreted remittance choices, we also conducted 28 in-depth interviews with Dutch-Armenians who did not consider themselves core or active diaspora members. We applied a snowball technique and combined different sources to identify interviewees (i.e., posting about the research project on diaspora social network platforms, calling and emailing individuals and organizations associated with the diaspora, and attending community events). The primary language for conducting interviews was Armenian, and English was used if respondents had difficulties communicating in Armenian. Hence, some interview quotes presented in this article were translated from Armenian to English by the first author.

³ Tölölyan (1988) referred to the Armenian Apostolic Church as the main institution representing the Armenian diaspora over centuries.

⁴ The Armenian General Benevolent Union was established in Cairo, Egypt, in 1906 as a non-profit organization and is currently present in 31 countries (AGBU 2021).

⁵ The Armenian Revolutionary Federation has been a transnational organization since its inception in 1890, with established affiliates in more than 20 countries (Tölölyan 2000).

We combined interviews with participant observation to better understand diaspora engagement practices. Overall, we attended eight diasporic events, such as fundraisers, cultural events, and Sunday Masses in the Armenian Apostolic Church from April 2016 to January 2018.⁶ Additionally, we observed the everyday operations and activities of diaspora organizations, as well as informal social gatherings of Dutch-Armenians, to gain a broader understanding of diasporic life on a weekly basis from April 2016 to January 2018. In addition to the above-mentioned methods, we conducted a thematic analysis of a set of media publications about and by diaspora organizations, as well as information publicized by diaspora organizations through email. This method identified broad topics relevant to the study, familiarized us with discourses generated by or about the Dutch-Armenian diaspora, and gave a more comprehensive understanding about the Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands.

Armenians Diaspora in the Netherlands

There are approximately 7 million⁷ Armenians living outside Armenia, with the largest populations concentrated in Russia, the United States, France, Argentina, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Canada, Ukraine, Greece, and Australia (Kalantaryan 2017). The academic literature on the Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands is small (Hostlag 2018; Galstyan 2014), but it indicates

⁶ All references in the article to the Armenian Apostolic Church are designated as ‘the Church.’

⁷ Estimates of the Armenian diaspora’s size vary, as there are no official statistics supporting this number. Seven million, however, is commonly stated by Armenian state officials and scholars (e.g., Adriaans 2019).

that the current Dutch-Armenian diaspora developed after the Second World War as a result of mixed migration flows. Relatively small waves of Armenians arrived in the Netherlands from Indonesia in the 1940s, from Greece between 1950 and the 1980s, and from Iran between 1950 and 1985 (Holslag 2018). One of the largest groups of Armenians in the Netherlands migrated from Turkey between 1960 and the 1970s, due to guest-worker agreements (Holslag 2018). In the mid-1990s, a number of Armenians from Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria arrived in the Netherlands as refugees of the First Gulf War (Holslag 2018). After the Soviet Union's collapse, another major group of Armenians arrived in the Netherlands, with the majority designated as asylum-seekers due to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and poor economic conditions in Armenia (Galstyan 2014). Since 2011, there has been an ongoing migration of ethnic Armenians from Syria to the Netherlands, due to the Syrian Civil War (Galstyan 2014).

Interviews with representatives of diaspora organizations, as well as a review of official Armenian state sources (e.g., Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, 2021), estimate that there are approximately 20-25,000 Armenians living in the Netherlands. Interview results show that most Armenians originating from Middle Eastern countries are descendants of Genocide survivors⁸ who have been reproducing their diasporic identity for three to four generations and have almost no direct links with the Republic of Armenia. Meanwhile, Armenians migrating from Armenia are first-generation migrants who, as some interviewees described, have no experience of “living in diaspora settings.” Upon arrival in the Netherlands, Armenians formed various organizations that stimulated the Armenian diaspora's emergence.

⁸ After the Genocide of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire, most survivors became refugees outside Turkey (Sahakyan 2015).

Armenian transnational organizations developed in a similar manner to those that had developed in earlier periods in other countries such as France, Germany, and the United States, bringing coherent diaspora ideologies into the Dutch context and connecting Dutch-Armenians with wider diaspora networks. Local organizations mainly focus their activities within the city where their members have settled or at the country level.

According to interviewees, Armenians in the Netherlands do not currently have huge economic potential and could not be considered a wealthy diaspora able to provide substantial support to their homeland or to a diasporic community in need. The first generation of Dutch-Armenians were low-skilled migrants, and one or two generations of settlement in the Netherlands has not been enough to achieve significant social mobility toward high-skilled occupations. According to this research, the vast majority of Dutch-Armenians are of either low or lower-middle socio-economic status. Within the Dutch-Armenian diaspora, there are a few cases of small and medium-size business owners and an even smaller number of individuals that can be considered wealthy. Thus, the Dutch-Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands does not have a class of wealthy philanthropists, has low financial capital, and has not fully developed a philanthropic culture. Representatives from diaspora organizations underlined that there were new Armenian migrants trying to settle in the Netherlands:

Let me give you an example: if a person has just graduated from the university and has entered the field of his professional activity, then you can't expect him/her to have a great financial investment somewhere else. But someone else who already has 15-20 years of working experience can have a bigger investment. This community is still in the status of a graduate student or a recently graduated student, and naturally, after 5-10 years, their

involvement will increase in parallel with their professional abilities and financial capacities. (Organization leader, Dutch-Armenian)

The Dutch-Armenian population's low to lower-middle socio-economic level in the Netherlands, in principle, does not favor the development of a diasporic engagement to collect and send collective remittances to the homeland, thus making the study of the production of collective remittances generated by people still struggling for a better life in their host country even more interesting.

Collective Remittances from Above

Gamlen (2014) defines state-governed diaspora institutions as state offices dedicated to emigrants and their descendants, especially formally named, funded, and staffed offices within the executive and legislative branches of national governments, such as diaspora ministries, special departments within ministries, and local embassies (e.g., Mali's Ministry of Malians Abroad, the Jewish Ministry of Diaspora Affairs). In the Armenian diaspora, collective remittances at the state level are initiated by the All-Armenian Fund created with the Republic of Armenia's direct state support after its independence in 1992 (All-Armenian Fund 2020). As the Fund's charter stipulates, it is governed by the Republic of Armenia's Constitution and legislation (All-Armenian Fund 2020), and its official website describes its work as a "worldwide collaborative effort fueled by the Armenian Diaspora" and a "unique national duty" (All-Armenia Fund 2020). According to the Fund's official website, more than \$550 million have been invested into Armenia and the

unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic⁹ since 1992 (All-Armenia Fund 2020). State-driven collective remittances efforts generally direct contributions to pre-determined needs and objectives, such as large-scale infrastructure projects, highway construction, agricultural projects, schools, and water provision (Adriaans 2019). Additionally, as is discussed later in the article, state-driven collective remittance efforts can also arise in response to specific events, such as conflict escalations or emergencies.

During interviews conducted for this study, Dutch-Armenians and diaspora organization representatives noted that trust in the Fund as a reputable institution had decreased among Armenian migrants over the past two decades.¹⁰ Notably, donation information about the Fund's Annual Donation Telethon is disseminated through both the Armenian Embassy in the Netherlands and general Armenian media sources. However, Armenians from the Republic of Armenia have generated criticism and weakened trust toward the Fund among the wider diasporic network because Armenians from the Republic are considered up-to-date regarding developments in the homeland. Almost no Dutch-Armenian from the Republic of Armenia reported donating to the

⁹ Nagorno-Karabakh, also known as the Republic of Artsakh and Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, is an unrecognized republic in the South Caucasus. This region's status has been disputed between Azerbaijan and Armenia since the Soviet Union's collapse (Bolsajian 2018).

¹⁰ Suspicion of illegal spending of the money collected by the Fund continuously appeared in Armenian media, damaging the Fund's image (Aravot 2016). Furthermore, the Fund's executive director was accused of embezzlement in 2018 (Asbarez 2018).

Fund during its annual fundraising telethon events, for example. As a woman who moved to the Netherlands from Armenia in the early 1990s discussed,

When Armenia became independent, diasporic people who had never seen the country thought that they could finally donate and construct the country they dreamed about. But in the 1990s, when Armenians from Armenia migrated here, they opened their [Armenians from Syria, Iraq and other destinations] eyes and explained that, with your money you construct the villas of oligarchs, not the country. Since then, the amount of donations has declined. Now people want to find reliable ways to give their money. (Gohar, Dutch-Armenian)

Even though the Fund's fundraising efforts target all Armenians throughout the world, the findings of this research show that fundraising initiatives managed by the Fund were mainly supported by two groups in the Netherlands: 1) second-, third-, or fourth-generation Armenians and 2) elite members of the diaspora, such as philanthropists, who represent a very small segment of the Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands.¹¹ Fieldwork also demonstrated that the links between second, third, and fourth generations of diaspora Armenians (i.e., Armenians who migrated to the Netherlands from countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon) and the homeland have declined over generations. According to interviewed Dutch-Armenians, the vast majority of these individuals contributed modest amounts of money to the Fund, demonstrating an

¹¹ The idea was widely supported by both key informants and other Dutch-Armenian interviewees.

attachment to Armenian official institutions (i.e., as a symbol of loyalty toward their homeland) but not a full trust toward them. Additionally, the small group of Armenian philanthropists in the Netherlands contributed to the Fund mainly when conflict broke out in September 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. This high level of contributions to the Fund was rapidly dialed back after a ceasefire agreement was signed in November 2020, demonstrating a lingering lack of trust toward the Fund.

There was a widespread rumor among interviewed Dutch-Armenians that the largest amount of donations directed to the All-Armenian Fund from the diaspora worldwide are based on personal connections between political elites in Armenia and major Armenian businesspeople in the diaspora. According to Dutch-Armenian interviewees in our study, these large donations gave major Armenian businesspeople in diaspora more “welcomed” opportunities for their business investments in Armenia. Additionally, according to official information publicized on the Fund’s website, the Fund also offers symbolic reverse remittances to major donors, granting the status of “honorary member” to those who donated \$1 million or more, “benefactor” to those who donated from \$500,000 up to \$1 million, “support members” to those who donated between \$250,000 and \$500,000, and “donor member” to those who donated between \$100,000 and \$250,000 (All-Armenian Fund 2020, Yeghiazaryan et al. 2017). Remarkably, neither our research nor the Fund’s official website identified a Dutch-Armenian taking part in this elite circle of donors recognized by the Republic of Armenia (All-Armenian Fund 2020).

After Armenia’s Velvet Revolution¹² in Spring 2018 (Iskandaryan 2018), trust in the

¹² Armenia’s Velvet Revolution took place from April to May 2018, upon which the government passed the ruling mandate to the opposition (Iskandaryan 2018)

authorities in the Republic of Armenia improved among diaspora Armenians, and according to interviewees, this development also impacted Dutch-Armenians' attitudes toward the All-Armenia Fund. During the escalations of conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in July 2020 (All-Armenian Fund 2020) and over the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in September 2020, there was high mobilization among the diaspora.¹³ Armenian transnational non-state institutions, local organizations, and informal networks initiated several activities in the Netherlands to contribute to the Fund. For example, according to information shared by a local organization through emails, a network of Dutch-Armenian women sold *jingyalov hats*,¹⁴ and Dutch-Armenian small-business owners (e.g., bakery, beauty salon, flower shop, photo studio) sent their daily revenues to the Fund. The utilization of activities such as baking fundraisers and donating revenues from various small businesses to generate collective remittances for the Fund was unique for the Dutch-Armenian community, as these methods had not been utilized before the war's outbreak. These various collective remitting activities were quickly dialed back after the ceasefire agreement was signed between Armenia and Azerbaijan on November 9, 2020 (Armenpress 2020). According to information publicized on social media

¹³ From September 27, 2020, to November 9, 2020, armed conflict between Azerbaijan, supported by Turkey, and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Armenia took place in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenpress 2020).

¹⁴ The literal translation: "bread with herbs." *Jingyalov hats* is a trademark dish of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh and has a symbolic meaning for Armenians. It is often commercially presented alongside the flag and monuments of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (Matevosyan and Dalalyan 2016).

channels, primarily Facebook, various diaspora organizations for Dutch-Armenians, as well as individuals, expressed mistrust toward the Fund and shared concerns over a lack of accountability on how collected money was spent.¹⁵

During fieldwork, diaspora mobilization also took place around the 2016 April Four-Day War between the unrecognized Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan (Zolyan 2017). Armenia tried to coordinate and encourage provisions of material help from the diaspora by directing collective remittances to the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic's Ministry of Defense, which published their official bank account's transactions online in an effort to show donation transparency. Fieldwork indicates that the Church played the role of broker between homeland and diaspora and served as a center where Dutch-Armenians gathered to collect money and discuss possible ways of supporting the homeland. However, according to an interviewed priest, the Church delivered only half the collected money to bank accounts provided by the state. The other half of collected funds went through unofficial channels (i.e., trustworthy people in the homeland). The priest of the Church in Almelo explained that although there was no obligation to respond to the call via formal state-linked channels, there was a "*moral obligation*" to show support to the Armenian state in a time of crisis.

Interviews also demonstrated that in emergency situations, the Church's role as the mediator of state-diaspora relations was central for collecting remittances. However, little direct reliance on state-initiated channels did not indicate an *absence* of Dutch-Armenian commitment to the

¹⁵ Considering that fieldwork was undertaken before the conflict's escalation in 2020, we only focus on the time period covered by fieldwork.

homeland, as demonstrated in Narine's example:

I don't believe those big organizations. I trust a very narrow circle of people. I know what happened to those funds that were functioning in Armenia, say, Kirk Kerkorian Foundation.¹⁶ Maybe some people will take some percentage of it, maybe not... What I know is that there's a risk. I prefer giving money to individuals I know. (Narine, Dutch-Armenian)

The findings of this research show that state-driven remittances encompassed only a part of the Dutch-Armenian diaspora's collective remittance effort. Our research on collective remittances from above reveals that the existence of state-led initiatives did not necessarily lead to the diaspora's mobilization. The lack of mobilization of the Dutch-Armenian diaspora in response to initiatives led by the Republic of Armenia is mainly explained by their mistrust toward state-offered channels of remittances, despite the existence of accountability mechanisms and reverse remittances. Therefore, we emphasize the importance of studying the activities of transnational *non-state* institutions and *informal* networks, both of which are covered in the following sections.

¹⁶ Kirk Kerkorian was Armenia's largest diaspora benefactor and established the Lincy Foundation, which has provided around \$1 billion to Armenia since its inception (Radio Liberty Armenia 2016). It has been discussed in the Armenian **media** (e.g. Radio Liberty Armenia 2016) that Armenian authorities were not transparent enough with the use of the foundations' funds.

Collective Remittances by Transnational Non-State Institutions

We use the term “transnational non-state institutions” to describe transnational networks of diaspora organizations that connect several diaspora communities and aim to shape diasporic agendas and policies. We use the term “transnational,” as distinct from “diasporic,” because several key non-state Armenian institutions are not exclusively diasporic institutions, with one example being the Armenian Apostolic Church. Transnational religious, political, and social organizations have registered headquarters in Armenia but have functioned without state support for more than a century, becoming more transnational than national entities (Tölölyan 2000). Tölölyan (1990, 124) found that over centuries, these Armenian diaspora organizations, or what he refers to as “diasporan polity,” have developed “a government of exiles... that envisage[s] itself as responsible for and leading the entire nation.” Thus, the term “transnational non-state institutions” comes close to what Brinkerhoff (2019) refers to as “quasi-governmental institutions,” which, she argues, were particularly important in supplementing state functions and more formal state-driven diaspora institutions.

This study indicated that an important feature of transnational non-state institutions is a distinct gendered division of internal roles (and related power). According to fieldwork, men mainly led activities and “controlled” diaspora engagement in these Dutch-Armenian institutions. Fieldwork also revealed that women played mostly ancillary roles at the transnational non-state institutions’ engagement level, helping with organizational activities and with the logistics of social, educational, and cultural events. Women mainly led branches within male-led transnational organizations (i.e., the women’s union within the Church and the

teachers' network of Sunday Armenian language schools). This structural distinction (and inequality) was reflected in the composition of interviewees selected to discuss collective remittances initiated by transnational non-state institutions. Since the leaders and organizers of transnational non-state institutions were all men, all interviewees who were selected to talk about activities initiated by these organizations were men. During fieldwork, all interviewees that represented the Armenian Church, an important broker of collective remittances between Dutch-Armenians and Armenians in the Republic, and other transnational non-state institutions were also men, again reflecting this gendered division of roles and responsibilities. Religious and socio-cultural organizations were traditionally led by men in pre-migration contexts (e.g., Syria, Lebanon, Iraq) (Arahamian 1999), and this pattern was also reflected in the structure of the "diaspora elite" in the Netherlands.

Collective fundraising activities were often initiated by the Church, both directly by the centralized Church government and separately in each diaspora community, to assist vulnerable people in the homeland and during crisis situations. A Church priest in the Netherlands described the Church's involvement in assisting the homeland as a diasporic duty:

Of course, our primary mission is the salvation of the human soul, but we should not forget that we are the Armenian Church. We will always stand for Armenia and for the protection of our homeland. Therefore, with the help of Dutch-Armenians, we will support our homeland with whatever we can. (Priest, Dutch-Armenian)

According to interviewees, as well as participant observation, the Four-Day War in 2016

generated one of the largest mobilizations of collective remittances in the Dutch-Armenian diaspora in recent years and utilized several channels. The Church's transnational networks played an important mediating role in delivering remittances to the homeland. According to the interviewed priest, Church representatives not only transferred money but also traveled in-person to Armenia, where the Social Department of the Mother See of Holy Etchmiadzin¹⁷ provided a list of families in need, including wounded soldiers, war-affected families, and people who lived on the border between Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan. The Dutch-Armenian priest visited families and gave spiritual and material support to those in need. As the following excerpts suggest, the Church tried to attract not only those who "blindly remit[ted]" because of their faith but people looking for reliable partners for transferring financial aid as well.

People know that each year, I visit Armenia. Every year, people send with me some money to give to families in need. There are even people who already have beneficiary families there. Every year, they send money either through me, or they just send it to Armenia to help them... Many of these people that send money with me, I don't see regularly on Sundays. (Priest, Dutch-Armenian)

Collective remittances initiated by the Church illustrate its dual role in the diaspora: first, supporting the state when financial aid is needed, and second, gaining Dutch-Armenians' trust by providing reliable connections in Armenia for money transfers. Many people who led

¹⁷ The Armenian Apostolic Church's governing body.

remitting initiatives disseminated information through the Church, as was demonstrated during an observation after a Sunday Mass service. An individual visiting the Armenian Church collected money to construct a psychiatric hospital in Armenia. The necessity of mobilizing the diaspora's financial potential was communicated to the priest in advance of the Mass, and at the end of the ceremony, the priest announced to the congregation that there was a cause that needed the diaspora's support. Donations were, then, collected on the spot or given to the Church at a later time. Another instance of how this form of remittance collection occurs, thanks to the Church's intermediation, was displayed through the visit of a war veteran:

A Nagorno-Karabakh war veteran¹⁸ visited the Armenian Churches in the Netherlands, presented his veteran's certificates, awards, and pictures with prominent people, and collected money from the Church in Almelo. Other European-Armenian communities also supported his collection of money for families of war participants. (Fieldnotes, June 17, 2017)

These collective remittances, donated by people after religious services, have a strong emotional element, especially if the remittances have a purpose, such as protecting the homeland or supporting war veterans. While the priest arranged time for the guest speaker to address the congregation, donations were given spontaneously by Armenians attending the church service in response to the message communicated by the guest. In these cases, trustworthiness may not

¹⁸ The first war over Nagorno-Karabakh took place from 1991 to 1994 (Shahnazarian and Ziemer 2012).

always require a form of background check or confirmation of reliable use of money, while for state-driven collective remittances, there is an expectation of accountability and transparency of the use of the money. There were, for example, no formal mechanisms to check the affiliation of the war veteran who solicited donations at churches. As interviewees claimed, “they proved their trustworthiness with their biography.”

These findings also show that the Armenian diaspora is increasingly linked to and simultaneously connected with both their origin country and other transnational diaspora communities, such as the Armenian minority in Syria. A portion of the Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands, for example, is composed of Syrian-Armenians, and interviewees often noted that they should raise money for not only the motherland (Armenia) but also the fatherland (Syria) as their “second homeland.” The Church mediated charity activities in support of war-affected places and populations in Aleppo, Syria. For this purpose, the Church’s patriarch in Syria visited Armenian churches in Amsterdam, Maastricht, and Almelo to inform Dutch-Armenians about the situation in Syria and to embark on a fundraising campaign. Leaders of transnational non-state organizations became important brokers for collecting aid: these “trusted people” not only initiated but also mediated remittances by sharing information about existing remittance activities. They also reached out to their personal contacts and used their personal authority to ask individuals to join initiatives: “I personally contacted my friends and told them they have to help, not ‘Can you help?’ This is the time when you have to show your will” (Organization leader, Dutch-Armenian).

Collective remittances initiated within transnational non-state organizations complement state activities in terms of the direction of remittances, target audiences, and involved networks, without neglecting state-initiated priorities. These organizational activities are followed by

reverse remittances by both the state and direct beneficiaries. Reverse remittances at this level can be in the form of small video-clips or pictures of beneficiaries, which interviewees proudly showed during interviews (Fieldnotes, October 18, 2017). At a more official level, organizations received appreciation letters, certificates from the former Ministry of Diaspora, and preservation of “Armenianness,”¹⁹ which improved their reputations in the diaspora network.

Collective Remittances from Below

We define remittances generated by migrants at the local diasporic community level, encompassing both formal local organizations and informal networks, as ‘collective remittances from below.’ Unlike transnational non-state institutions, formal local organizations and informal networks are not a part of transnationally networked diasporic organizations and do not have the goal of impacting, and are not directly affected by, diasporic agendas. *Formal* local organizations, instead, include registered organizations that function at the local level and shape the local diasporic life as registered charities or socio-cultural organizations. *Informal* networks are non-registered charity organizations, as well as networks of relatives and neighbors who work together to help people in need in their homeland. These networks’ founders and participants included mostly women who were not affiliated with official diaspora institutions. Dutch-Armenian women, who were excluded or marginalized in official and semi-official diasporic institutions, reacted by

¹⁹ Interviewees interpreted “preservation of Armenianness” as preservation of Armenian heritage and identity, such as language, historical memory, culture, and traditions.

creating their own diasporic networks, their own endeavors to collect collective remittances, and their own alternative channels to send remittances to the homeland, at an informal level.

Similar to state-driven and transnational non-state forms of engagement, activities at the local level increased due to the escalating conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016. Local organization representatives mobilized their members to discuss different ways to support the homeland as soon as they received information about the conflict. Notably, there was no cooperation between local organizations to transfer the gathered money, as each organization found its own channels and trustworthy people to deliver donations. For example, one organization provided financial support to the village that suffered the most casualties and infrastructure damage due to the Four-Day War, while another donated funds to buy equipment to strengthen the line of defense for a village directly bordering Azerbaijan. Another organization found it important to financially support the families of fallen soldiers:

There was a person that was planning to travel to Armenia. So, in one day, we said, “OK, we will collect money; everyone can contribute as much as they can.” We knew a person who was informed about people that were affected during the war and were ignored by the state. We collected and delivered our donations to specific people. (Gohar, Dutch-Armenian)

Many first-generation Armenian migrants stated that they had families living in Armenia and that they consistently provided financial assistance to them before the escalation. The will to collectively remit rose even more after the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2016. A woman who initiated remittance activities after this escalation explained the need to organize in the

following way:

Before the April War, I never thought of it, but after the war, I felt that I want to do something. I organized some events, collected money, and bought warm clothes for soldiers. I personally took it to Armenia, personally climbed the mountains, and met the soldiers in the trenches. When I returned, I thought I needed to continue, as I saw what's happening there. A woman's father and brother died during the first war in Nagorno-Karabakh, and now the husband died, too. She is staying in the house of one of her three children and can rely on no one's help. I thought I should continue this job and open a formal organization for supporting people in those situations. (Heghine, Dutch-Armenian)

According to fieldwork, even if women did not openly challenge men in power within the diaspora, they organized alternative activities and found alternative links to solicit donations, such as connecting with and engaging non-Armenians in the host country. Heghine's organization lacked the financial capacity to implement initiated projects. Therefore, her organization tried to engage Dutch NGOs that provided support to developing countries and Dutch people through outreach to personal contacts such as friends and acquaintances. They also participated in Protestant Church events by preparing and selling homemade sweets to gather additional funds that were not covered by resources from their co-ethnics:

We collect amounts needed penny by penny... It is hard, but we must collect the needed money. We have a goal to reach: a 300-meter-long 5-story building in Tavush,²⁰ the roof of which must be renovated. There are 25 families there. We financially assist these families until we resolve this issue. I hope we can get this money through Dutch sources. (Heghine, Dutch-Armenian)

Another form of “collective remittances from below” was initiated by informal groups of women, such as neighbors, friends, and acquaintances that at times even transcended co-ethnic links. The founders and participants of these networks are referred to by Shain and Barth (2003) as the diaspora’s silent, non-elite members: a larger pool of people who are generally uninvolved in diasporic affairs but may mobilize in times of crises. For example, once a month, women gathered at the home of an individual from their informal network, had dinner, and used that occasion to set a fundraising goal and beneficiaries. Participant observation showed that these gatherings were accompanied by long talks about the news in Armenia, strong criticism of the Armenian government, and the diaspora’s need to help people in the homeland (Fieldnotes, August 10, 2017).

A closer examination of the Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands shows that the boundaries between individual and collective remittances blurred in these informal network activities. We term these activities “*semi-collective*” remittances because even though this type of remittance went beyond family ties, there was a close sense of connectedness at the personal level between

²⁰ Region in Armenia.

the sender and recipient. An example of a “semi-collective” remittance was demonstrated by three neighbors who decided to donate on a monthly basis to one family in need in Armenia. Later, the network widened as more people joined the donation pool and expanded to include acquaintances of the original neighbor group:

The idea was to give a small amount of money individually but to gather as many people as we can so that the collected money is considerable. We decided to help those people with whom we have no connections; they are not our relatives or acquaintances. In the beginning, there were three of us; now we are 33. (Lucy, Dutch-Armenian)

Another informal network founded in Leiden included a group of women who transferred a monthly allowance to a family in need. The ties between this network’s organizers and beneficiaries evolved into friendships as the organizers closely followed the beneficiaries’ lives:

Once, we helped a girl and gave her 300 EUR, but then, we thought about what was next. She will buy a thing or two, and the money will be gone. So, we decided it would be better if we invest it in her education; then it will ensure income for their family. Also, people will know that what they do is going somewhere useful. We found hairdressing classes for her and paid for everything, even for the taxi. We are constantly in touch with her teacher to see if she is progressing. We are very happy... The teacher said that finding a job won’t be a problem for her. (Susan, Dutch-Armenian)

Trust, connectedness, and reputation were the key resources for facilitating non-official remitting practices. These activities' main brokers had a reputation of being "modest" or "intellectual" people and had their own networks of individuals whom they mobilized to collect remittances. For example, Armenian-language teachers in a diaspora organization organized meetings with parents to explain and convince them of the need for remittances. Trust, in this case, was mainly constructed around individual characteristics, and the person's reputation within the diasporic community ensured the reliability of financial transactions: "For now, all our activities are based on personal trust; people trust me and give money. Whoever doesn't know me, they won't give money no matter what story I present" (Anna, Dutch-Armenian). These non-official brokers connected diasporic remittances to the homeland because they were well informed and had personal contacts who could deliver assistance. Connectedness could also encompass not just direct connections, but chain connections: organization leaders knew a person who knew a person who needed money. Personal connections, thus, served as a tool for verifying provided information:

There is an NGO that helps families living near border areas. We know them from Facebook. They write posts about families in need on Facebook, and we use our connections to double-check and decide whom to help and how to help. Maybe I wouldn't give that money to my relative, but I would give it to them; we don't give money to random people. (Mariam, Dutch-Armenian)

These types of remittances are important for people who do not have personal connections to Armenia. For example, Iraqi-Armenians or Iranian-Armenians with no connections to Armenia and a distrust of state structures were keener to give money to a person they knew:

Many people were eager to participate and send help to Armenia after the war in April. We knew that one of our people was going to Armenia, so we decided to send money with her... as much as we could gather at that moment. We haven't collaborated with any organization or fund. We had a certain person who knew certain people that had suffered during the war. So, we gave the gathered money to these people. They were mainly the families of fallen soldiers.
(Anahit, Dutch-Armenian, originally from Iraq)

These informal networks' initiators mentioned two main reasons for not formally registering their organizations. First, they believed that any state intervention could potentially break the "intimacy" of the relationship between senders and receivers. Second, there were doubts as to whether homeland and host country authorities could make financial transaction procedures more complicated by, for example, taxing and controlling resources or creating bureaucratic hurdles. Tangible proof of an effective and trustworthy relationship between the sender and receiver, as well as with the larger Dutch-Armenian diaspora, represented a form of reverse remittances: it gave donors a sign that the intermediaries that would transfer their donations to beneficiaries in Armenia were reliable and that their donations would be effective. At the level of remittances from below, organizations provided donors with payment receipts, such as signed documents stating that beneficiaries had received the donation. These receipts may not have had

any legal value, but they were a mechanism to prove the network's transparency and trustworthiness. Additional informal ways of ensuring accountability included disseminating pictures of beneficiaries, as well as letters of appreciation, receipts, and thank-you messages in the form of short videos or handmade art crafts. Participant observation revealed that feelings of satisfaction and encouragement played important roles in facilitating and continuing these informal collective remittances. Additionally, these reverse remittances were shared in social media groups to make their activities more transparent for the larger Dutch-Armenian diaspora.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analyzed collective remittances as a crucial aspect of diasporic networks and activities to achieve a deeper understanding of internal dynamics, organizational functioning, gender roles, and links with the homeland and other relevant institutions of Armenians in the Netherlands. The Armenian diaspora in the Netherlands presents a compelling case for examining diaspora engagement in a non-traditional destination, where migrants are still struggling for a better life in the host society. We observed the establishment of channels and practices of collective remittance management both in early stages and during times of transformation. In doing so, we highlighted different forms of diaspora-homeland cooperation channels, the central role of trust in collective remittances, women's agency in developing alternative forms of collective and "semi-collective" remittances, and the use of "reverse remittances" in response to collective remittances

Table 1 about here

Here, we highlight the main contributions of our analysis. First, identifying three levels of

collective remittances - remittances from above, remittances by transnational non-state institutions, and remittances from below, we challenged state-centric approaches in diaspora studies (e.g., Ragazzi 2014; Gamlen 2014) and showed that the most visible, official, and institutionalized forms of collective remittances do not exhaust the rich landscape of these essential diasporic endeavors. As illustrated in our fieldwork, despite the existence of state initiatives, collective remittances were not solely formalized and institutionalized activities, as different groups and networks in the diaspora had their own preferences on how to engage and for which causes to remit. Migrants and people with an immigrant background may form relationships with the homeland based on sources they believe to be reliable, whether transnational diasporic organizations, the Church, or informal networks. Hence, the examination of collective remittances shows that diasporas are not only a “practice of power” (Ragazzi 2009) but a lived experience as well.

Second, the article shows that the Church acted as a “broker of trust” between donors, state institutions, and local recipients, not only transferring donations collected by Church members but also delivering donations from Armenians that were not directly affiliated with the Church. Additionally, our analysis offers new evidence in support of the finding that religious institutions are relevant players in transnational migration and religious belonging as drivers of transnational connections (Levitt 2007; Kivisto 2014). As we showed, the Church closely cooperated with the Armenian state for homeland protection and mediated charity contributions from the Dutch-Armenian community. The Church also played an important role in the Dutch-Armenian community’s “transnationalization,” creating sustained connections between diasporic communities, as well as between the diaspora and the Armenian state. Furthermore, the Church had a multi-linked character, as it expressed solidarity not only toward Armenia but also toward

Syria by directing collective remittances in support of war-affected Armenian populations in Aleppo, Syria.

Third, this article demonstrated that the presence of unofficial networks among Dutch-Armenians that had a self-initiated character, as Dutch-Armenians tried to creatively overcome barriers, such as untrustworthy remitting opportunities, preventing their donations from reaching their homeland by creating networks that made collective remitting practices partly independent and self-perpetuating. As this article made clear, unofficial remitting practices from below blurred the concepts of “collective” and “individual” remittances, due to the kinship ties of remittance networks and the development of closer sender-receiver relationships. In response to this practice, we introduced the concept of *semi-collective* remittances, overcoming a dualistic contrast between individual and collective remittances presented in several studies (e.g., Boccagni and Decimo 2013; Goldring 2004). Women were especially active in informal collective and semi-collective remittances, in contrast to transnational non-state institutions mainly led by men. We suggest that women’s role in organizing parallel and alternative flows of collective remittances can be explored in future research as a potential site of indirect resistance to male dominance in diaspora leadership and an affirmation of women’s agency.

Fourth, and finally, this article made clear that collective remittances cannot be fully understood without studying their counterpart – reverse remittances. Collective remittances are imbued with practices of community-building and often followed by reverse remittances: official certifications, symbolic recognitions, and enhanced social status for donors in the homeland. Reverse remittances reflect the system of reciprocal exchange between diaspora and homeland in which social relationships and trust are embedded. Trust toward remitting channels is particularly relevant for collective remittances from below, and reverse remittances help ensure

the positive reputation of brokers in charge of money transfers, whose reputation can have an important influence on the size of remittance flows and on the people who choose to remit.

Future research can expand understandings of remittances by deepening inquiry into unofficial, small-scale actions, in addition to state-driven, large, pan-diasporic collective remittance practices. Other diasporic migrations, and their formal and informal collective remittances, can be compared with the case of Dutch-Armenians. Our proposed classification of collective remittances (remittances from above, remittances by transnational non-state institutions, and remittances from below) presents a method of examining several understudied aspects of diasporic communities. In particular, paying attention to non-state institutions and informal channels of remittance can serve as a launching point for examining stateless diasporas (e.g., Yezidis, Kurds, and Assyrians) that do not have state support and whose collective remittance practices generally remain understudied. This approach may additionally widen knowledge of diasporic communities by highlighting their priorities, remitting capacities, connections and disconnections with their homelands, and wider diaspora networks. This article also shows the need for further gender-sensitive research on collective remittances, on the asymmetries of gender power in diasporic institutions, and on women's agency in challenging or circumventing those asymmetries by establishing alternative channels of collecting and managing of collective remittances.

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