

## Conflict and contestation in the cross-border community: hometown associations reassessed

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### Abstract

Drawing on a broad variety of field research projects among Salvadoran immigrant hometown associations in Los Angeles, conducted over a ten-year period, this paper seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on hometown associations by shifting the focus to the political processes underlying associational politics and the characteristics of the organizational field that structures their activities. We argue that conflict, both among migrants in the 'hostland' and between migrants in the hostland and stay-behinds in the 'homeland', is an inherent aspect of hometown association activities and their efforts to create sociability 'here' and development 'there'. We demonstrate that the hometowners abroad have difficulty deciding what they share in common; those who do engage in organized efforts to span here and there represent a select few. Moreover, the issue of how the migrants and their associations relate to the people and institutions left behind is often a dilemma, resolved in any number of ways, not all of which render satisfaction at either ends of the chain.

**Keywords:** Transnationalism; hometown associations; collective remittances.

Displaced from familiar ground and treated as strangers, migrants often discover a commonality in people originating from the same place. Whether we call them *landsmann* or *paisano*, immigrant hometowners seek to come together – finding comfort in the company of a familiar face, gaining pleasure from reminiscing about times gone by or deriving satisfaction from the effort to make things better for the home and hometowners left behind.

Immigrant associations span the two ages of mass migration as well as the globe, giving rise to sustained scholarly interest and an ever-growing research corpus, recently reviewed by Moya (2005). That the

associations are almost omnipresent does not mean that they are all the same. Just what ends the associations promote – do they simply provide a space for socializing or do they fulfil some more instrumental end? – has been a matter of dispute (Sassen-Koob 1979; Basch 1987). While the stimulus for associations derives from universal aspects of the migration process, the degree to which influences stemming from the sending, as opposed to the receiving, country shape the form and content of associational life is also not clear. Though associations appear among both internal and international migrants, taking on similar forms and functioning in like ways, the question of whether the crucial influence stems from long or social distance, on the one hand, or the crossing of a political border, on the other, remains in play, as discussed in Fitzgerald (2005).

While scholarly debate on the associations and their causes and consequences has long been in play, hometown associations (HTAs) are getting new attention, because the policy and political worlds now see them as significant. Piquing interest is the rapidly emerging awareness of immigrant remittances and their impact on developing countries. Remittances to developing countries are large (the second largest source of development finance after direct foreign investment); rising (up by almost 100 per cent between 1999 and 2004); stable (with less volatility than other sources, such as capital market flows or development assistance); and free, requiring neither interest nor repayment of capital (Ratha 2005). The money that migrants harvest and send home also seems to be at once an effective of means of reducing poverty *and* a form of self-help – or so it is often seen (see the studies summarized in Ozden and Schiff (2006)).

If remittances have become the ‘new development mantra’ (Kapur 2005), investing the hometown associations with similar potential is just one small step. While the very great bulk of migrant remittances result from the individual preferences of immigrants acting in parallel, but uncoordinated fashion, the size of the flow is such that decisions to channel even a small proportion of the funds in the form of ‘collective remittances’ could yield significant impact. Migrant philanthropy, as it is often called, appears to be a grassroots phenomenon, an additional virtue in the eyes of development policymakers, convinced that economic performance and broader participation go hand in glove (Burgess 2005). From the standpoint of development agencies, the prospect that immigrant associational activity in the developed world could leverage capital *and* participation for stay-at-homes in the developing world seems worth the gamble, as evidenced by a rapidly expanding portfolio of research and programme development grants.

Sending state officials are no less interested in ‘collective remittances’, though they are affected by a somewhat different mix of motivations. Acutely aware of the importance of individual migrant

remittances, leaders in the sending states think that the HTAs could channel individual contributions towards collective investments, which, if successfully captured, could produce political gains for the political leaders who bring these benefits home – a view clearly at variance with the goals espoused by the ‘development community’.

As for social scientists, the thread leads from the ever-growing interest in the myriad of connections that span migrant sending and receiving states. From this perspective, the hometown associations exemplify the emergence of ‘transnational communities’ linking migrants here and there. In the most favourable view of the phenomenon, HTA engagement in hometown development denotes the advent of ‘migrant civil society’, as argued by Lanly and Valenzuela (2004), of which one component is ‘a common sense of membership in a shared political community’, as Jonathan Fox has written in a recent article on ‘Unpacking transnational citizenship’ (2005). While more sceptical assessments can be found, the policy and political responses to the HTA development have provided a further catalyst to scholars on the look-out for new opportunities for study, as evidenced by the outpouring of research on the various Mexican (federal and state) programmes seeking to motivate and channel associational activity.<sup>1</sup>

Whether hometown associations can effect change in the communities from which the immigrants come, and, if so, of what type, depends largely on the quality and content of the linkages connecting the migrants to one another, as well as those that tie them to the friends, families and neighbours left at home. Scholarly views range the spectrum, with little consensus as to consequences, whether positive or negative, or the features that limit or propel successful associational activity. Indeed, the very same authors can present the phenomenon in two very different lights, sometimes emphasizing ‘the influence that home town civic committees can have on the power structure of places of origin’ and insisting that ‘migrant transnational political activism is more likely to line up with the forces of change’ (Portes 1999, pp. 473–5), while in other statements noting how ‘a history of distrust and social fragmentation’ can put associational ‘long term dynamism ... in question’ (Portes and Landolt 2000). Similarly signalling the many-sided nature of the phenomenon, with positive impacts offset by the negative is Peggy Levitt’s *The Transnational Villagers* (2001), a study of the connections between a group of Dominicans living in Boston and their hometown of Miraflores in the Dominican Republic. In a chapter focusing on a development committee started by the migrants, Levitt depicts the committee as a grassroots effort yielding positive effects: investment in hometown public goods; the fostering of social capital, in part by stimulating broader participation, in both home and host-towns; and increased

hometown government accountability, as migrants' dollars and pressure gave stay-at-homes greater leverage over state officials. On the other hand, migrants' ongoing efforts to do good also entailed a steady shift away from partnership with those left behind, with decision-making gravitating to the Bostonians, whose priorities increasingly diverged from those of the Miraflores still living in Miraflores.

If this account of the balance sheet between hometowners 'here' and 'there' is nuanced, it is not fully complete, pointing to the need for greater attention to the political processes inherent in associational activity, as well as the structure of the organizational field in which the associations operate and its impact on associational life. Unfortunately, these are questions to which the literature has yet to attend. Even the most acute analyst, ever-sensitive to the micro-politics of place – most notably, Robert Smith (2005) in his study of the long-distance relations between Mexican migrants in New York and their rural hometown in Puebla – leaves internal associational politics as a black box. And, while Smith rightly insists that communities can be at once bounded *and* contested, the very boundedness of the community under his lens is surely a variable property and one not likely to be shared by all other immigrant populations or the associations to which they give birth.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to the emerging literature on hometown associations by shifting the focus to the political processes underlying associational politics and the characteristics of the organizational field that structures their lives. The case in question is that of Salvadoran hometown associations in Los Angeles, an experience that is well suited to assess the broader issues in play, given the rise in Salvadoran HTA activity following the cessation of El Salvador's civil war (Landolt, Autler and Baires 1999); the greater salience of hometown, as opposed to national-level homeland matters among Salvadoran immigrants (Guarnizo, Portes and Haller 2003); and the interest, shown both by the Salvadoran government and international development agencies, in HTAs as possible catalysts of development (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2005).

We argue that conflict, both among Salvadorans in the United States and between migrants in the 'hostland' and stay-behinds in the 'homeland', is an inherent aspect of hometown association activities and their efforts to create sociability 'here' and development 'there'. As we will show, the migrant hometowners have difficulty deciding what they share in common; those who do engage in organized efforts to span here and there represent a select few. Moreover, the issue of how the migrants and their associations relate to the people and institutions left behind is often a dilemma, resolved in any number of ways, not all

of which render satisfaction at either end of the chain. In practice, the effort to help out the people left behind complicates the notion of a transnational 'community' encompassing a collectivity spanning 'here' and 'there.'

The paper is an exercise in grounded theory: we draw on fieldwork to focus on the following set of dilemmas, all of which were inductively identified from the material collected in the field:

- Participation
- Free-riding
- Internal competition
- Opportunism
- Rationalization
- Migrant/hometown inequality
- Long-distance coordination
- Relationships to state actors.

We now describe the research procedures that follow and then provide background on the specific case. We then move to the data, summarizing the patterns we encountered, with detailed case-study evidence used to illustrate some of the most salient points.

## Methods

The paper builds on field research among Salvadoran immigrant hometown associations in Los Angeles, conducted over a ten-year period. The research includes:

- In-depth case studies of five hometown associations, conducted during the early 1990s. These case studies involved initial interviews with association leaders in Los Angeles (members of the committee *directivas*); subsequent visits to the related hometowns in El Salvador, at which time interviews were conducted with local political officials as well as local groups or individuals coordinating with the LA-based *comite*; and, last, twelve in-depth interviews (lasting one to two hours) with association members in Los Angeles.
- A survey of twenty-eight hometown associations, conducted in 1994: using a set of contacts generated by one of the two grassroots Salvadoran immigrant social service agencies of the time, this survey involved short interviews with hometown association leaders, focusing on organizational histories, ongoing activities, ties to hometowns.
- Ongoing participant observation in an association formed subsequent to the initial research; this activity, conducted over the course of more than a year, included attendance at a wide variety

of associational events and fund-raisers, occasions that provided opportunities both for observation and informal interviewing; formal, in-depth interviews with associational leaders; a visit to the hometown in El Salvador; and extensive contact with the hometown mayor.

- Over twenty-five in-depth interviews with hometown association leaders in Los Angeles and El Salvador, as well as Salvadoran political officials, NGO workers and members of hometown committees, conducted from winter through summer of 2005, as well as attendance at a variety of HTA events, such as fundraisers and dances.

### Background

By the early 1970s, a small flow of labour migrants from El Salvador had converged on selected US cities – mainly Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington. Large-scale migration was unleashed by the wave of violence that swept through the country during the late 1970s, as political protests, led by students, unionists and peasants, were repressed by the army and paramilitary groups, leading to the outbreak of civil war. During the 1980s, when close to 400,000 Salvadorans moved to the United States, the number of Salvadorans living in the United States jumped almost four-fold. Though the civil war came to an end in the early 1990s, migration continued. Though organized violence abated, other push factors remained in place: the difficulties of the country's subsistence farmers, the collapse of the coffee industry and the continuing shortfall in the production of staple, adequately paying jobs in the formal sector. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, a number of disasters, including hurricanes and earthquakes, provided additional motivation to seek haven elsewhere. As with many other migrations, the embedding of a migrant population with access to jobs and housing in the host country, as well as the finances needed to support migration, whether legal or illegal, facilitated subsequent movements. By 2004, 1.2 million Salvadoran-born persons were living in the United States, up from 16,000 in 1970 (Mahler and Ugrina 2006).<sup>2</sup>

Though violence was the principal impetus for flight during the 1980s, emigration was also strongly affected by the crisis in rural economies. Consequently, emigration rates vary considerably across the country, with the highest levels found in the poor, eastern zone, which also happened to be an area of intense fighting. Emigration has since diffused, a process hastened by the urbanization of the population, which increasingly converges on the San Salvador metropolitan area.

Though the migration was impelled by civil war, the migrants were not granted refugee status (see Menjivar 2000), largely because doing so would have forced the Republican administrations of the times to concede that the Salvadoran government it was supporting had been guilty of human rights violations. Moreover, relatively few were eligible for the amnesty provided by the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, as large-scale migration began in the very late 1970s, just shortly before the act's 1 January 1982 cut-off date. While many immigrants did apply for asylum, the US government approved fewer than 3 per cent of the asylum applications submitted by Salvadorans throughout the 1980s. In 1990 the US congress provided Salvadorans with Temporary Protected Status, an action repeated several times since then; this measure has allowed Salvadorans to work and reside legally in the United States on a short-term basis, without, however, providing a door to permanent legal status (Garcia 2006; Menjivar 2006).

This distinctive experience notwithstanding, the Salvadorans offer a useful and appropriate case. Cross-border social and economic exchanges, linking Salvadorans living in the United States to friends, kin and community in the home country, developed as soon as the migration occurred, as the migrants rapidly began to send remittances home (Montes 1989). With the cessation of the civil war, back and forth flows widened. In addition to sending remittances – now received by 22 per cent of the population – Salvadorans living abroad are frequent visitors to their country of origin; between 1990 and 2002, foreign travel to El Salvador quintupled, with most passengers coming from the United States. Flows go the other way as well, with rapid growth in the export of 'ethnic products' sent from El Salvador for consumption by Salvadorans living in the United States (Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2005).

The effort to transform informal social connections into formal organizations linked to the hometowns left behind is thus one aspect of the growing nexus tying Salvadorans in their 'host' country to those still living in the 'home' country. HTA formation occurred rapidly, following the cessation of hostilities and the signing of peace accords in the early 1990s (Landolt, Autler and Baires 1999). As noted, our 1994 survey identified twenty-eight hometown associations, most of which were then newly established. More recently, the Salvadoran government has estimated that there are at least 250 HTAs outside the country, most located in Los Angeles.

As with other groups, immigrants' ability to leverage US-based resources to effect change in the homeland has galvanized a response from the home state as well as from development agencies. Following the peace accords of the early 1990s, the Salvadoran government gradually initiated a programme prioritizing collaboration with hometown associations, seeming to acknowledge the success of these

organizations in implementing local development projects (Popkin 2003). Through *El Fondo de Inversion Social para el Desarrollo Local* (FIDSL) and the *Direccion General de Atencion a la Comunidad en el Exterior* of the Ministry of Foreign Relations, the Salvadoran government is attempting to leverage the international migratory process by establishing linkages with immigrant organizations in the US that are engaged in local development projects in their country of origin. By offering funds to Salvadoran immigrant organizations abroad, the Salvadoran government hopes to enhance local development efforts in El Salvador through increased collaboration between the immigrant organizations and local and national government officials in El Salvador. This programme, *Unidos por la Solidaridad*, is influenced by a similar programme in Mexico that offers matching funds to local projects in Mexico initiated by immigrants abroad.

While associations have proliferated, participation levels are less impressive. Data from the Comparative Entrepreneurship and Immigration Project (CEIP), collected by Alejandro Portes and his collaborators, show that Salvadorans are far more likely to participate in hometown associations than are either Dominicans or Colombians. Nonetheless, just under 8 per cent of the random sample of Salvadorans surveyed in Los Angeles claimed to participate regularly in a hometown association and even fewer reported making contributions to a hometown project. However, roughly one out of six Salvadoran respondents, surveyed by the CEIP's random sample, reported occasional levels of involvement, suggesting that, while hometown associations were propelled by an immigrant elite, they nonetheless involved a significant grassroots component, at least if by judged by the usual indicators of civic participation.<sup>3</sup>

## Receiving context dilemmas

### *Origins*

The hometown associations are voluntary associations, making them vulnerable to the problems encountered by the broader class of organizations to which the HTAs belong. In the ideal typical framework, the association emerges organically out of ongoing activities that bring together hometowners without planning or deliberate forethought. Drawing on the patterns identified by Massey and collaborators in their classic *Return to Aztlan* (1987), the HTA is part of the process of migrant settlement, with social circles steadily moving beyond immediate family to include *paisanos*, then informal soccer clubs and, at the end of the chain, a formal organization of hometowners. The case studies of Mexican hometown associations assembled by Lanly and Valenzuela in their recent edited collection offer

numerous supporting examples, whether of an association formed by Zacatecanos settling in the same neighbourhood and parish in Los Angeles and converging on a single economic niche (Lanly and Hamann 2004, p. 154) or of a group from Pegueros that first came together for football and baseball games and then realized that these regular get-togethers could be transformed into something else (Escala-Rabadan 2004, p. 428). Our own fieldwork, conducted in the early 1990s, uncovered beginnings of a very similar sort.

### *Case-study evidence*

Many of the discussions concerning the formation of the associations occurred at the community soccer games. Since the beginning of the 1980s, several male Salvadoran soccer leagues with teams representing the home communities have been established in Los Angeles . . . [These] soccer games became a place for the community members to exchange information about jobs, housing, social events that are planned, and events back in the home community in El Salvador. . . . Although specific social gatherings such as weddings, baptisms and birthdays (particularly the *quinceanera* or 15th birthday of young women) also serve as events that enable Salvadorans from the same home communities to come together, it is the soccer clubs that involve the broadest community participation. In each of the five associations studied extensively . . . the initial discussions that led to the establishment of these organizations were held at the community soccer games.<sup>4</sup>

At one level, the boundary between soccer game or social gathering, on the one hand, and hometown association, on the other, may be quite blurred. As the literature shows, one single pattern prevails: hometown associations have no paid staff, depending instead on the willingness and availability of volunteers to donate time, energy and cash in the interest of some public good. It is not even clear that they have members either, a fact reflecting both the low level of organizational formality and the episodic nature of the HTAs' engagement with the larger, relevant collectivity. 'Membership' is rarely a clearly defined category, possibly pertaining to families or to individuals (as noted in Escala-Rabadan 2004). Like the more informal gatherings from which they sprang, the associations proliferated as wildcat events, emerging spontaneously, without direction or master plan. Though each association comes together around 'its own' hometown, as organizations they are much the same, raising funds and gathering community members in similar ways and under like circumstances. To be sure, not all associations function in identical fashion, but as the outliers are not only more self-conscious about ends and means, but

also aware of how they differ from the rest, they turn out to be the exceptions that prove the rule.

#### *Participation and free-riding*

Most importantly, the HTAs are established in order to get something done, which means that they also entail a shift from pure sociability to work. Consequently, participation is the first of the dilemmas that the associations confront. It is not that the associations and a broader hometown population never connect. The problem, rather, is that hometowners who appreciate the public goods that the associations generate may also conclude that the individual cost of contributing to the collective good outweighs any benefit, in which case involvement is likely to be low and episodic. Indeed, the many studies of Mexican hometown associations point in exactly this direction: while the number of associations has burgeoned, the proportion of immigrants participating in the associations is modest, at best.

#### *Case-study evidence*

Describing the evolution of his association, one respondent told us that: “We began with 40 and we finished with 7, plus a son of the group whom we think of as part of our group. Two to three years after we began we invited all the members of the community to a carnival and the idea of that was to have food, give refreshments, the idea was to present ourselves to them and to renounce our posts and to invite them to participate, you understand? About 25–30 persons, families came, everything was nice and they were happy that we invited them . . . and no one wanted to do it . . . there are people who say ‘we want to participate’ but we know that [they don’t really want to do it].”

While voluntary associations can be effectively run by a set of core members engaging with a periphery of more erratic participants, maintaining the balance between core and periphery can be precarious. The core may be willing to absorb a disproportionate share of the human and material costs, but that will only be true up to a point; the difficulties entailed in shouldering the burden are all the greater, given the limited resources of the immigrants who animate these particular associations.

#### *Case-study evidence*

The economy of the HTA development effort is built on the economic gap between ‘here’ and ‘there’. The associations’ collective fund-raising efforts yield relatively modest amounts: according to Orozco (2003), the typical HTA annually generates roughly \$10,000

in contributions. A well-attended *fiesta* could generate as much as \$5,000, after costs; an association that could organize two such *fiestas*, or perhaps a set of other smaller activities, could realistically hope to reach the \$10,000 level. However, the economy of the HTA development effort can be undone should the expenses and revenues entailed in fund-raising get out of line. Parties are profit-generating activities when participants make both in-kind and cash donations: e.g., someone who both puts a case of Heineken on the table, to be sold for a dollar or two per bottle, *and* also buys a ticket, to use an example from one of our interviews. Expenses can also be controlled if the party is held at a hometowners’ house, although that venue sets a limit on attendance and therefore on net profits. Events put on in a rented public space will generate higher attendance, and therefore, greater revenue, but in that case the costs also rise. According to informants interviewed during our most recent fieldwork, the charges for renting a location and band and providing parking for attendees who came from all over the Los Angeles had risen to levels that the HTAs were increasingly unable to afford. The smaller the core group, moreover, the higher the costs, as some activities were no longer donated, but had to be contracted for a fee. In one association, all the active participants were entirely deployed in running and managing the events, requiring the association to engage an outsider to provide food who received a third of the price on every item sold.

Fund-raising capacity and the demands placed on associational activists reflect the depth of resources that can be tapped. In this respect, the Los Angeles-based HTAers may lag behind their counterparts in the Washington, DC, area, among whom a sizeable group of successful construction contractors can be found. Paul and Gammage (2004), for example, report that one Virginia-based association sends home collective contributions averaging \$25,000 a year; according to Andrade-Eekhoff (pers. comm. 2005), some of the Washington-based contractors are at once so successful and so busy that they no longer volunteer to run their *fiestas* and *tardeadas*, but rather engage for-profit contractors to take care of these affairs.

#### *Capture*

If the public good characteristic of the HTAs may be one factor that could lead hometowners to free-ride rather than invest, the potential for capturing the association, so that it meets the goals of a narrower group, may be the source of other problems. In general, associational activity is a minoritarian affair (as noted by Carling 2004, p. 12). Research on Mexican HTAs highlights the over-representation in

associational activities of an immigrant elite. As described in Escala-Rabadan's recent review article:

In the great majority of cases, it is a matter of migrants of the first generation, well established in the United States (a decade or more after having migrated), who have already achieved a certain socio-economic level: many of them are owners of small businesses (insurance, real estate, Mexican restaurants); some are professionals (lawyers, social workers, doctors) or government employees. At the same time, the majority of leaders and members are men (Escala-Rabadan 2004, p. 435).

The associations studied in our initial phase of fieldwork were similarly animated by a small, somewhat selective group, with a core membership of eight to fifteen people, almost all of whom were men, with the exception of the occasional woman elected as secretary. Returning to the field roughly ten years later, the Salvadoran organizations seem more varied in their propensity to recruit an elite group, at least as compared to the Mexican associations described by Escala-Rabadan. At one end of the spectrum is an association with home country linkages to government officials and right-wing party leaders in El Salvador and LA-based linkages to Latino entrepreneurs of differing national backgrounds. Of somewhat similar nature is an association established by an immigrant who became wealthy as the result of an unusual windfall. Less exclusive, but still selective relative to the average immigrant is a well-organized, socially conscious association, with a committee of fourteen, eight of whom are property owners in the hometown. At the other end, is a small, but quite dynamic committee that is entirely female led, and whose members' low-level jobs (as babysitter, for example) shows how the huge gap in wage conditions and living standards between 'here' and 'there' allows migrants of the most modest standing to emerge as significant social actors back home.

As noted earlier, associational activity entails a cost/benefit ratio that may discourage many, if not most, hometowners from participating in all but peripheral ways. Leaders also have reason to be content with a small, selective group. The cost/benefit ratio differs for those in control, since the associations provide visibility and allocate offices to people who often have few other opportunities for recognition. Likewise, the home country impact yields contact with higher-status persons, which can be the source of satisfaction. Beyond selfish considerations, there are practical reasons for the core to hoard control, as it is easier to do things with a smaller, rather than larger group – considerations likely to weigh heavily on immigrants with limited time for leisure time activity. While some associations have an

organizing, membership-building, expansionary orientation, that outlook is not widely shared.

### *Conflict*

Participants or public may be content to allow the leaders to self-select and self-reproduce. However, there is always the potential for conflict or competition – in which case, an organization formed to bring hometowners together might instead give them an occasion to quarrel. That there is potential for conflict would not be news to the hometown activists, who come from a highly polarized society and whose cleavages have also been transplanted to the new land. Indeed, conflict is meant to be averted, as indicated by the three-point 'philosophy' of an association of associations: 'no politics, no religion, no profit.' There would be no need for such an injunction if hometowners were normally apolitical or indifferent to matters of faith; rather, these issues are intrinsically hard to keep at bay, which is why the associations have to strive to keep their inner lives as a separate sphere.

Moreover, the tension between instrumental and expressive ends has operational consequences that are difficult to escape. Associations seeking to go beyond nostalgia will have to care about the competence of their officers. Since competence is unlikely to be shared by all who want recognition, someone's quest is bound to end in frustration. Conflicts *can* be managed, a matter likely to depend on the nature of the ties among the hometowners and the exchanges across their connections. While the greater the mutuality, the greater the incentives for friendly conflict resolution, mutualism does not appear to characterize the contemporary HTA. Other binding factors, such as residence in a common neighbourhood or work in a similar occupation, seem present to a very minor degree. Rather, the hometowners are often not a clearly bounded group, as residence in the United States has facilitated relationships of a much more diverse kind. Though associational events engage families, the adults often have partners from a different hometown or national group. Likewise, the tight spatial and occupational groupings emphasized by the literature have loosened, a tendency already noticeable in the early 1990s, when participants in the soccer leagues no longer came from a single residential cluster, but commuted from a variety of places across the region. A decade later, ongoing observation of an association highlights both geographic dispersion and social class diffusion: this association runs its social events in two different parts of town, as the more middle-class hometowners living in the San Fernando Valley no longer feel comfortable spending evenings in south Central Los Angeles, where their less successful compatriots reside.

With hometown social ties loosened, the incentive structure may favour secession, as the impediments to starting up a rival group are low, and populations may be large enough to support more than one association from the same hometown. This pattern was evident almost from the start: noting the schismatic tendency, Eekhoff's (1994) study also pointed out that separate associations never coordinated their activities and rarely communicated with one another. Geographic factors come into play: collaboration with hometowners located in other areas of Salvadoran concentration, such as Washington or Houston, often proves difficult, in part because associational activists are sometimes not even aware of one another's existence. Even a history of ongoing contacts across the different nodes of immigrant concentration may not be enough, as evidenced by the experience of a long-established association whose affiliates in southern and northern California have seen priorities diverge. Consequently, the associations are strongly local, with connections extending from a particular place in El Salvador to a particular place in the United States, and weak or non-existing ties linking the hometowners residing in different parts of the migrant world.

#### *Opportunism*

Collective goods are vulnerable to capture by opportunists seeking to take advantage of others' trust. Opportunism is the malevolent side of the social capital that leads social scientists and right-thinking advocates of social change to find HTAs appealing. Opportunism is hardly new to migrants accustomed to seeing home country public officials behaving in predatory ways. As an extension of everyday sociability, however, the HTA is an entity of a different type, reason for the hometowners to donate funds and time under the assumption that people who are 'all of a kind' are therefore 'all in the same boat'. Moreover, the operating principles of the association differ from those of a bank, which is why trust is provided without verification. But the same factors that induce giving also facilitate stealing, either by thieves who pass themselves off as brothers or friends or by persons of initially good inclinations but who find that larceny is a temptation that they cannot resist.

However, ownership, as in marriages or partnerships, may be a matter of point of view. Not only will some hometowners contribute more than others; it may be that doing good for the group is also a way of doing good for oneself. Generating material benefits makes ownership a practical question, in which case, the dispute over what belongs to whom may be ground for divorce. If barriers to entry are low, then unhappy partners trading mutual accusations of theft may be

inclined to continue to celebrate and help their hometowns, but to do so in their own, separate ways.

#### *Case-study evidence*

In some instances, competition trumps common origins by taking divorce-like form. A member of one of the first-established HTAs did publicity for the broader group, a process that brought him into contact with the entrepreneurs who patronized the association's event. The publicity activities evolved into a little business, generating revenues sufficient for purchase of computers and other equipment needed to produce a newsletter sent to the hometown as well as an annual brochure. But to whom did this equipment rightly belong? The hometowner who took the initiative? Or the association on whose behalf he worked? Not able to reach agreement, the parties opted for separation, with the result that two different associations now exist. Another permutation can be found among hometowners from a small city, who maintain three associations, each with their own set of activities and hometown linkages. This is a case, not so much of divorce, but rather of organizational profusion, as each one seems to have been established to pursue a different vision of the imagined community left behind. Those differences, in turn, express a variety of cleavages, some having to do with ideology, others with social class background, others with differing views as to how the associations should be run and toward what end.

#### *Rationalization*

Rule-making and rationalization are the time-honoured means of ensuring that money and other resources are used as their donors had intended. But rationalization conflicts with the purely social principles and feelings that frequently animate the hometowners, which is why informality is often preferred. For the same reason, the boundaries between the association and the community it claims to represent often remain amorphous. As long as membership is ill-defined, however, the effective decision-makers are those who show up for any one meeting, in which case claims to representativeness are open to question.

#### *Case-study evidence*

One such case emerged from fieldwork conducted in the early 1990s. A number of migrants not previously involved with one of the then newly founded associations came to a meeting held to elect a new *directiva* (board of directors). Although the association had been formed to provide aid to the hometown, these newcomers had a



different view, advocating instead the provision of support for migrants who needed assistance with funeral expenses. As the newcomers brought large numbers of supporters to the meeting, they elected two representatives to the directive. An enormous amount of conflict erupted in the association. Eventually, the newcomers left the established entity and founded a hometown organization of their own.

On the other hand, membership criteria involve more than drawing lines distinguishing the association from the 'community' – namely, a structure that would administer those lines. Such a structure is probably more than many of the associations can bear. In our view, seconded by a knowledgeable Salvadoran government official with a good deal of first-hand information, associational administrative capacity generally takes a rudimentary form. Informality often prevails because that is how things are done. Frequently even the most rudimentary organizational principles, such as setting regular meeting dates and times, have to be learned. Keeping good books and maintaining them transparently are other seemingly simple devices for controlling funds and directing expenditures; they are also skills, of a non-trivial nature, that activists have to acquire. While some associations have opted for formal non-profit status – a development strongly advocated by the Salvadoran officials interacting with the HTAs – formalization has mainly increased administrative burdens, with little in the way of off-setting benefits. Although transparency is not always avoided – with one association going so far as to put its annual budget on the web – it is not always welcomed, as leaders seeking to hold on to positions of authority are often reluctant to invite accountability.

Looking backwards at the evolutionary sequence by which the associations emerged, it appears as if the shift from soccer game to formal organization involves a greater break than noticed by either HTAs or their scholars. After all, there is no ambiguity about how a soccer game is to be run: everyone plays by the same rules. Likewise, team membership can be fluid: the same group of players need not assemble on the field every week for a game of the same sort to start. But each association represents a new beginning, with plenty of room for disagreement as to the rules of the game, and few guidelines as to which rules should be invoked. As long as the associations seek to go beyond sociability and actually do things, moreover, the decision-makers cannot be selected as if one were still playing a pick-up game of soccer, even though the desire to just have fun with a group of friends may have been the catalyst that brought the hometowners together in the first place.

### **Sending context dilemmas**

Although the literature emphasizes the boundary-spanning aspects of immigrant 'transnationalism', its preconditions are in fact the boundaries that separate receiving and sending communities. Movement to a new place gives the migrants freedom not possessed before; as emphasized above, residence in a rich country means that even people of modest means have access to resources that can make a difference back home. For the same reason, therefore, they can exercise leverage in their dealings with home community interactants, a factor making for imbalance in the relationship between the two sets of hometowners and increasing the likelihood that the migrants will have access to home society influentials not fully shared by the hometown rank and file. In addition to the strictly material, the migrants possess something else that the stay-at-homes do not share: namely, the experience of migration and exposure to a new way of life and its culture. While the HTA represents the power of continued home country attachment, those attachments are often expressed in ways that reflect the changes that the migrants have undergone: though speaking the language of 'community', the hometowners here and there are really no longer the same.

Presence in the hostland and the consequences thereof make migrants and stay-at-homes different. However, these factors may not be decisive for the question at stake: the extent to which the hometowners 'here' and 'there' represent trans-state collaborations in any meaningful sense. Following Fox (2005), who in turn draws on Keck and Sikkink's (1998) work on transnational advocacy, we focus on two aspects of the interaction between the migrants and stay-at-home: jointness in the formulation of goals and projects; and balance in the relative influence exercised by either side.

### *Migrant-hometown inequality*

The HTAs are indigenous organizations of the migrants, not carry-overs or imports from the home country nor extensions or branches of home country organizations. While some HTA leaders had been activists in the Solidarity movement, during which time they effectively functioned as long-distance members of a Salvadoran political party, the advent of the associations represents something different: the activation of ties that cross-cut party or ideological differences, undertaken in the absence of signals from organized entities at home. For the same reason, goals and objectives are likely to have a made-in-the-USA quality, most importantly, heightened expectations regarding public services and infrastructure, on the one hand, and the value of participation beyond elite levels, on the other.

Consequently, initiatives have largely, if not exclusively, been taken on the US side. Fieldwork in the early 1990s showed that a return trip was often the catalytic event. With the end of the civil war, migrants able to return home for the first time in a decade or more were startled by the gap in living conditions that they confronted:

"I returned to Cacaopera for the funeral of my mother and was saddened to see the situation there. I used to work as a health care worker in the town, and I was shocked to see the poor sanitation conditions, the lack of medicines and supplies in the health clinic. These conditions made me realize that my situation in Los Angeles was considerably better."<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the past two decades, dramatic or catastrophic events – such as earthquakes or hurricanes – often provided the spark that generated the forming of an association.

As we found during our 1994 survey, initiatives initiated by *individuals* in El Salvador were not infrequent. Eekhoff (1994) provides several relevant cases, such as an association that responded to a request from a hometown soccer team or one that received an appeal from a nurse in the local hospital. According to our survey, most HTAs were activated by explicit appeals from El Salvador, with the rest emerging as the result of events and processes taking place on the US side. However, *none* of the home country initiatives observed during this earlier phase of research emanated from an organized entity with which the US-based HTA could have functioned as branch or balanced partner.

As the organized initiatives are undertaken stateside, so too the fundamental choices are for the migrants, *not* the stay-at-homes, to decide: which goals are to be met, how help is to be delivered; to whom assistance should be provided. HTA assistance generally falls into a small number of categories: charity; infrastructure; human development; productive (profit-making) projects; advocacy (Alarcon 2000; Orozco 2003). Choosing one option rather than the other bears on the range and style of possible partnerships: charitable aid can be given directly to existing institutions; infrastructural development almost always involves some coordination with political leaders and agencies on the ground back home, who are also ultimately responsible for implementation; human development, as in the form of scholarships, can support existing institutions, but can be allocated according to criteria established by the association. Likewise, the migrants need to decide how best to involve the stay-at-homes, whether as partners, advisors or simply as the more or less passive recipients of help.

Goal-setting is affected by any number of factors, starting with the migrants' desire to do good for their hometown and hometowners. But

HTA views of how best to do good are largely *ad hoc*. Their preferences frequently lead to visible physical investments, such as recreational facilities or ambulances (a particularly common donation). These choices reflect grassroots understandings of how the migrants' collective resources might be deployed with greatest effect, as opposed to professional assessments, which might instead emphasize the provision of drinkable water or nutritional supplements for schoolchildren. They are also not fully realistic and therefore not fully consistent with the preferences of the stay-at-homes or local officials. In particular, the HTAs tend to underestimate the long-term costs of maintaining investments in physical goods, as in one small city where the ambulance donated by an HTA had become immobilized because funds were lacking to replace punctured tyres, or in another small town where neither the local government nor the HTA was prepared to finance maintenance of the recreational facility that the migrants had built.

While the HTAers want to do good, it is not clear that they *only* want to do good: physical investments are tangible products, reminding the stay-at-home public of the good that the HTAers have done. Nor is HTA goal-setting immune to the influence of naked self-interest, which can yield hometown investments that suit the migrants, but not necessarily the stay-at-homes.

#### *Case-study evidence*

The hometown is a classic migrant-sending community, located in one of the poorest of the country's regions, but now filled with large houses. The *caserio* is the Beverly Hills of the *municipio*, displaying modernization without development: nice, well-constructed houses, paved roads, electricity, landlines and cell phones for almost every inhabitant of the *caserio*. However, there is neither drinking water nor a sewage system. They still get the water from a well. For the local residents, furnishing the funds that could provide drinkable water has been the most important goal sought from the hometowners living in the United States. The HTA, however, has had different priorities. . . . While it funded construction of a well, the work was done in the property of a relative of the association's president. Sometime afterwards, the well ran dry.

#### *Long-distance coordination*

As to whether to collaborate with the stay-at-homes, research conducted during the early to mid-1990s found little evidence of partnering. Of the five associations that we studied, only one had developed a fully collaborative relationship with a committee of local residents. The other associations opted for a more hierarchical

structure. One worked directly with the mayor's office; a second, supporting a local hospital, coordinated with the hospital director; a third initially developed a relationship with a pre-existing civic committee, but severed the ties when that committee turned out to be inactive and continued working without any established partner; a fourth collaborated with a local committee possessing advisory capacity but no decision-making influence. Likewise, Eekhoff's contemporaneous study, found that only one of the twenty associations she studied had opted for a mutually collaborative relationship, with most relying on a single contact, whether acting on an individual basis or in an organizational capacity.

Partnering now seems more common, though far from universal. As one might expect, prior relationships of *compradazgo* or direct kinship often influence the choice of local partners. Consequently, the existence of a partner committee does not necessarily denote partnership between the migrants and the hometown 'community', whose bounds almost always surpass the limits of the migrants' social circles.

#### *Case-study evidence*

One of the first to get started, the association is unusually well organized, with a stable structure, a core group of highly committed activists in northern and southern California, and ongoing links to a broader set of involved migrant hometowners. From its earliest stages, the association had established a local committee, with which it has continuously collaborated. The local committee is a relatively elite group, consisting of teachers, salaried employees and business owners, all of them residents of the *municipio's* urbanized area, to which the bulk of the association's infrastructural investments have gone. However, development needs are greatest in the *municipio's* rural fringe. While community councils (*Adescos*) in the rural areas are eager to collaborate with the local committee, the latter is resistant and has thus far been unwilling to diversify its ranks or reorder its priorities.

Relevant decisions, regarding how to target, with whom to collaborate and with what degree of jointness, reflect other differences: most notably, ideological commitments and political sophistication. Hometown associations led by migrants with leftist inclinations are sometimes constrained in their ability to implement development projects in the home community if local leaders there represent other political tendencies.

While motivations often cut across ideological divides, associational activists with prior leftwing experiences frequently had a distinctive point of view. According to one HTA leader, quoted in a report written by two Salvadoran sociologists, the experience of arriving with

donations from the United States left him feeling like a type of Santa Claus (see Morales and Coastillo Rivas 2003). For associational leaders with a left background, experiences of this sort cut against the grain. For them, help from afar was imperative, but not necessarily an unmitigated good: like the remittances sent by individual migrants, the collective assistance of the HTAs alleviated suffering, but at the expense of relieving the government from actually intervening to effect change.

Regardless of ideology, implementation is ultimately affected by conditions and people on the ground – a crucial factor affecting the balance of influence between locals and the migrants residing in Los Angeles. While scholarships are a common form of HTA support, the behaviour of scholarship students is more difficult to monitor from afar than on-site. The same poverty that makes beneficiaries eligible for support is also likely to inhibit regular attendance or adequate school performance. The involvement of locals can be an effective check, increasing the likelihood that the migrants' investments are actually fulfilled as originally intended – but only if the migrants are ready to work with a group of 'stay-at-homes'.

Successful collaboration assumes that hometowners here and there share similar, if not identical, goals. But, as we found during the phase of research conducted in the early 1990s, priorities often diverged, making for ongoing negotiation and in some cases conflict between local stakeholders and migrants.

#### *Case-study evidence*

Conflict revolved around the largest project, a children's park. During the construction of the park, the full \$10,000 for the project was sent by the association. However, when several members of the association visited the hometown to inspect the completed project, they found that it was not finished and that all the funds had been expended. They expressed their concerns to the mayor and threatened to inform the rest of the community that funds had been misappropriated by the mayor's office. Apparently, the mayor saw to it that the project was completed promptly, particularly since the threat to inform the community occurred during an election year.

Not all such long-distance negotiations proceeded quite so smoothly. An HTA that donated four water tanks to a poor rural community, in the outlying areas of the hometown, expected that service would subsequently be provided by the national water authority. HTA leaders accompanied locals to a meeting with the agency, which resulted in a commitment to refill the tanks every two months with fresh water. When the agency failed to meet its commitment, the

association felt it had no choice but to subsidize the delivery of potable water. Another association, headed up by a long-time Solidarity activist, used funds collected in Los Angeles to construct a basketball court, but, as they later realized to their sorrow, hometowners 'here' and 'there' had variant perceptions of local needs:

[T]here isn't a connection. no identical thinking in what those of over there [*los de alla*] want and what we want. For example, in our hometown, we wanted to build a lighted basketball court and they dynamited it, "they destroyed it" [in English]. The people, no, because they say that we don't want basketball courts, we want football, soccer [in English]. So we have been thinking like semi-gringos, thinking that they want a basketball court. But the people of over there [say], "I don't want a basketball court, give me a soccer ball and a soccer field if you want to, if you don't want to, I don't want it."

On the other hand, insofar as implementation requires involvement by local officials, it biases contacts towards local influentials, as noted in the Salvadoran case study cited above, where the crucial local collaborators were sympathetic bureaucrats who could reach local decision-makers.

#### *State actors*

Last, *homeland* decisions have also affected the options available to locals, whether rank and filers or influentials. As noted above, autonomous migrant social action has produced a response from officials at different levels of the Salvadoran state, all of them seeking to capture a greater share of the migrants' made-in-the-US resources (see Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 2005, esp. ch. 6). Mayors have been galvanized into action by HTA intervention in local affairs, travelling to the United States to meet with hometown committees. Ideological differences can distance mayors from the migrant hometowners, though the politically agile mayors often know how to bridge these gaps. Regardless of ideology or party affiliation, other factors make for divergence, if for no other reason than the highly local ties of the migrants – for whom the community may be a small *caserio* – are not fully shared by mayors, who depend on the votes of the entire *municipio* and not just one of its hamlets.

More important is the role of the Salvadoran central government. As other analysts have noted (see Popkin 2003), strengthening ties to the migrant population in the United States and elsewhere has become a priority. In particular, the state has greatly stepped up consular services, expanding the number of consulates and adding to consular

staff, while also seeking to stabilize the legal status of the migrants, via lobbying of the US executive and legislative branches to secure passageways from undocumented to legal status and then using consular services to encourage immigrants to take advantage of these new programmes.

But there is also the possibility that the government's 'Strategy to Integrate and Link the Salvadoran Communities in the Exterior', as elaborated in a report prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, may also serve to channel the migrants' collective remittances in ways more closely aligned with made-in-El-Salvador priorities, at least as defined by state elites and political leaders. In that effort, the latter have both considerable motivation and a strong card to play, one that might tip the balance of influence away from the migrants and towards the stay-at-homes, albeit of a not particularly representative sort. Engagement with the 'Salvadorans abroad' can help build a partisan political base among migrants capable of providing both material backing and personal endorsements to political allies back home. Moreover, the same constituency can be harnessed for activities oriented towards collective investments, made all the more desirable if funnelled in ways that reward localities dominated by stay-at-home, political supporters.

#### *Case-study evidence*

As example, we point to the formation of the *Comite El Piche*, a hometown association originating among migrants from the small community of *El Carmen* in the eastern-most department of *La Union*. Led by a local entrepreneur closely linked to the ruling party, *El Piche* began modestly, but soon developed fund-raising ability well beyond the scope of the typical Salvadoran HTA, leading government officials to now see it as the model for other HTAs to emulate. The key innovation involved mobilizing some of the more successful Salvadoran immigrant entrepreneurs, while connecting with a diverse, deep pocket constituency of business owners servicing an LA-based Salvadoran clientele. Recent contributors to *El Piche's* efforts include: the Israeli-born owners of the small (but highly profitable) *La Curacao* department store chain, with a flagship store in the Pico-Union neighbourhood where the first wave of Salvadorans settled and where a significant Salvadoran population still remains; the Cuban-born owners of *Liborio* supermarkets, an expanding local chain, one of whose six stores is also located in the Pico-Union area; and the Los Angeles *Galaxy*, a professional soccer team with a famous Salvadoran player on its roster. *El Piche's* fund-raising in Los Angeles has generated exceptional benefits for the target communities in El Salvador. As of May 2005, the *Comite El Piche* generated just under 9 per cent of

the roughly 6 million dollars of contributions provided by HTAs participating in the matching fund programmes run by the government's *El Fondo de Inversion Social para el Desarrollo Local* (FISDL); in return, however, the FISDL directed fully 20 per cent of its expenditures towards projects associated with *El Piche*.

### Conclusion

If there is much for citizens to admire and scholars to learn in these grassroots, organized efforts to do good, it is still true that all that glitters is usually not gold. Hometown associations may possess the capacity for using resources leveraged in the rich countries where the immigrants live to produce social change in the poor countries from which the immigrants come, but if so they will have to surmount the dilemmas that we have reviewed above. Associations seek to bring hometowners together, but in doing so they may also provide an opportunity for the group to come to grief; consequently, conflict and its consequences – most notably secession – almost inevitably ensue. As many of the goods created by associations belong to the relevant (hometown) public, quite a few hometowners can benefit without having to participate, making free-riding an abiding dilemma; as low levels of participation also reduce conflict, leaders may actually prefer strategies that effectively discourage involvement. Moreover, not all hometowners with access to collective resources will be looking out for the community; the betrayal of trust is a common danger. While that threat can be reduced by running the organization according to the rule book, rationalization stands in tension with the desire for informal sociability that gave rise to the association in the first place.

With the extension of scope from sociability in the new land to development in the old country, there is an additional set of dilemmas for the HTAs to confront. The scholars of transnationalism write of transnational social fields in which persons participate and belong to a common social world, regardless of physical location in sending or receiving community. Though some scholars have emphasized the 'power of status' deployed by the so-called 'transmigrants' when intervening in 'transnational social fields' (e.g. Goldring 1998), they have not carried the observation to its logical conclusion: namely, that the real estate agent's maxim of 'location, location, location' is what proves decisive. Residence in a rich country and access to its resources are the conditions that let migrant hometowners, often not far advanced beyond the ranks of modest wage-earners, effect change in the places they left behind. In addition to possessing new-found leverage, the migrants are also likely to have new and different ideas, precisely because they have been changed by the experience in the new land (as noted by Carling 2004).

Moreover, asking just how the hometowners 'here' and 'there' can actually collaborate, and which of the hometowners on either side of the divide participate in the process, moves the obstacles to trans-state cooperation into clearer relief. To begin with, there are the practicalities of long-distance coordination. Physically, people can be in only one place at one time, a factor likely to be important if face-to-face communication matters – as appears to be the case. Not everyone can go from 'here' to 'there' and back with equal ease: among the migrants, the crucial interlocutors are likely to be those with the cash and legal resources that make travel a possibility; as to the stay-at-homes, they are largely precluded from on-site intervention with the HTAers living in the new land.

That the migrants present themselves as hometowners, moreover, does not mean that they are actually one and the same. As noted by Portes, the impetus for hometown-oriented activity frequently derives from rejection in the new land. However, the satisfaction sought from intervention in the community left behind often bespeaks unequal, not collaborative, relationships with the stay-at-homes:

I really live in El Salvador, not in L.A. [says the president of a Salvadoran HTA]. When we have the regular fiestas to collect funds for La Esperanza, *I am the leader and am treated with respect*. When I go back home to inspect the works paid with our contributions, *I am as important as the mayor* (quoted in Portes 1999, p. 466, emphasis added).

On the other hand, the plans developed by one group of people living in one place must inevitably be implemented a different group of people living somewhere else. In the event that the latter are excluded from the planning or implementation process, or feel themselves to have been neglected, they possess the means to make their discontent felt. An additional complication is created by the involvement of state actors, who possess the capacity to possibly frustrate the HTAs or, alternatively, steer them in directions quite different from those preferred by the grassroots.

In the end, this case study of Salvadoran hometown associations, while complicating the notion of 'transnational communities', shows that trans-state connections are an inherent aspect of international migration, albeit linking home- and hostland in a variety of ways, and with unpredictable effects (see Waldinger and Fitzgerald 2004). As international migration escapes states' efforts to border their populations, it generates ideational, cultural, economic and political spillovers that in turn yield significant effects, on both receiving and sending ends. The content and form of those spillovers, however, are not determined in advance. They are as likely to be negative as

positive; the connections which link home- and hostland also provide the means and motivation for conflict – among the migrants; between the migrants and the stay-at-homes; and between the migrants and various other home society actors.

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### Notes

1. For further background on the Mexican experience, see the essays collected in Lanly and Hamman (2004) and Merz (2005). Papers commissioned for the Woodrow Wilson Center's conference on 'Mexican Migrant Civic and Political Participation', November 2005, provide additional detail; see [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=5949&fuseaction=topics.item&news\\_id=150685#studies](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=5949&fuseaction=topics.item&news_id=150685#studies) (accessed 19 September 2006).
2. For histories of the migration, see Garcia (2006), Menjivar (2000) and Lopez, Popkin and Telles (1996).
3. Calculations made by the authors from the public use data set, found at: <http://cmd.princeton.edu/data.shtml>.
4. This quote is drawn from an unpublished paper written by one of the authors in 1994.
5. This quote is drawn from an unpublished paper written by one of the authors in 1994.

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