Introduction
How are some migrants better able to generate and mobilize monetary remittances than others? This question reflects the tension between, on the one hand, a strong public and academic belief in remittances as a bottom-up instrument for development, and on the other hand, remittances’ actual heterogeneity (De Haas 2010). In order to address this tension, scholars have called for approaching migration from an inclusive human development approach (De Haas & Rodríguez 2010) that places remittances within the possibilities, structural limitations, and development views that are relevant in a specific locale (De Haas 2010; Piper 2009; Raghuram 2007). Such a multi-dimensional and contextual approach draws attention to the way remittances take shape. Instead of assuming that remittances are a neutral, detached given, it interrogates the dynamics that intervene in the process of generating and mobilizing these.¹ That is, the process of making money that will be saved and send, and the process of putting this money to beneficial use ‘at home’. Even when remittances are singled out as the topic of interest, within a categorically much more extensive migration-development research field, they need to be embedded in a broader empirical context.

A capabilities perspective (Sen 1999) on migration may contribute to an embedded analysis of remittances by starting from what migrants are able to do and be to lead the life they value. This premise includes multi-dimensional capabilities that encompass well-being in migrants’ own terms, while it also identifies what is lacking. Moreover, a capabilities perspective is contextually sensitive. It focuses on the needs, aspirations, constraints, opportunities and achievements of specific migrants situated within the social environment of a specific locality. A capabilities perspective links remittances to how migrants and their families strive after what they want, and what they are able to achieve. It can thereby provide insight in the differentiated experiences of generating and mobilizing remittances.

¹ Gender analysis has provided important insights in the differentiated ways men and women send, receive, and spend remittances (ref). However, there is much less attention for the ways migrants (both men and women) are able to generate and eventually mobilize remittances.
This paper engages with a capabilities perspective on remittances by focusing on key capabilities of men and women who migrate to Costa Rica and Spain from the Nicaraguan village of Muy Muy. The paper's aim is twofold: first, to identify capabilities that help these migrants to generate and mobilize remittances, and second, to use this insight for highlighting how migration research may contribute to the capabilities perspective. By including Costa Rica and Spain, both a traditional and a more recent destination country, the paper aims to follow two important migration processes in the Muy Muy area, where families tend to diversify their livelihoods by engaging in different types of migration (Winters 2014). It is not, however, the paper’s intention to compare two destination countries. Rather, it uses similarities and differences of migrants’ experiences in multiple locations to bring the role of capabilities into sharper focus and highlight the contribution of migration research to the capabilities perspective.

The paper identifies particular tacit and non-tacit skills that migrants employ and considers these to be among the key capabilities for migrants’ migration process and their remittances. It argues that a translocal analysis of these skills contributes to understanding how remittances are locally valued, generated and mobilized. The paper addresses the need for remittances to fulfil local migration expectations and describes how, in order to access remittances, migrants employ tacit skills of pleasing employers, enduring and improving difficult working and living conditions, and networking. In addition, the paper highlights how migrants may apply newly acquired basic professional skills for the use of remittances ‘at home’. A capabilities perspective thus underlines remittances’ centrality to migration aspirations and achievements. At the same time, it indicates how remittances are mediated by an unevenly distributed set of context-specific skills that influences the extent to which remittances can fulfill local migration expectations.

In order to further evaluate migrants’ skills for a successful migration endeavor in local terms, the paper makes use of a translocal lens, based on the notion of ‘transnational habitus’ as introduced by Kelly & Lusis (2006). Taking skills as a case in point, this translocal lens highlights how migrants engage with multiple localities that carry their own possibilities.

---

2 The term ‘destination country’ is used in an open-ended way, in the sense that these countries are usually part of larger migration processes that involve multiple travels and homes.

3 In this paper, I take a broad view of monetary remittances, considering migration money that is both sent and saved (these monies are often intermingled). Remittances thus include money that migrants send home and is spent, money that migrants send home and is saved for future purposes, and money that migrants save up to bring home with them. At the same time, however, the paper’s focus on monetary remittances excludes social and in-kind remittances.
and limitations. It is precisely their multiple engagement that clarifies their choice between employing certain skills while sacrificing other capabilities, resulting in a translocal trade-off. The paper therefore suggests that the sensitivity to context that characterizes the capabilities perspective needs to be extended to the multiple social environments, beyond migrants’ origins, that become part of migrants’ capability set when they migrate. To be useful for understanding remittances and the migration-development nexus more generally, the capabilities perspective should thus not only be multi-dimensional, but also multi-contextual.

Most migrants presented in this paper are members of 26 families that are at the core of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork primarily based in Muy Muy (Winters 2014). The fieldwork covers five months of face-to-face research between June 2009 and August 2012, including interviews, participant observations and social mapping exercises with both migrant and non-migrant members of these families. Next to Muy Muy, the fieldwork extends to Costa Rica and Spain, where I contacted migrants based on my familiarity with their families in Muy Muy, with whom they share an enduring connection and commitment. In early 2011, I visited nine migrant families in their temporary homes in Costa Rica, dispersed across five locations (Nicoya, Alajuela, San Isidro de Heredia, San José, and Quepos). In August 2012, I visited nine migrants (eight female and one male) at their sites of work, home and leisure in and around Seville, Spain. With five of the female migrants in Seville I conducted in-depth interviews. The fieldwork also includes a one-year financial diaries project with 16 families in Muy Muy, and long-distance telephone conversations with a selection of research participants up to 2014. The combined experiences of Muy Muy families and their migrant members in Costa Rica and Spain provide the empirical basis of this paper.

Although the fieldwork did not set out to study migrant skills, in the course of research skills became useful for grasping migrants’ rather mysterious personal characteristics (Pessar and Mahler 2003: 817) that make a difference in their achievements. The notion of skills, as INSERT DEF. OF SKILLS HERE?, emerged as an appropriate term to cover at least part of some migrants’ ability to improve their lives. In addition, elaborating on migrants’ skills provided a possible enrichment of the rather narrow way skills have been interpreted in the migration-development literature so far (ref). In both Costa Rica and Spain, migrants’ skills were identified through fieldwork that focused on a broader range of themes. In Costa Rica,

4 The single male research participant in Spain reflects the feminized character of this particular migration process, as I explain below. Accordingly, it fits a research process in which all participants were selected through purposive sampling using snowball techniques. The male participant was the husband of one of my female participants; the other female participants either did not have male partners or migrated to Spain without them.
these included migration histories and projects (including the reasons and means for migrating and goals achieved or intended), work and carework, and daily life in Costa Rica. In Spain, topics also included migration histories and projects, as well as migrants’ monetary and social networks. In both contexts, particular skills contributed to migrants’ differentiated ability and effort to generate and mobilize remittances, as I will describe in the empirical sections of this paper. But first, I briefly introduce skills as a capability useful for exploring remittances and provide some context on Muy Muy’s remittances from Costa Rica and Spain.

Embedding remittances: values, capabilities and skills

Largely based on researchers’ diverging worldviews, a pendular movement between positive and negative observations of the migration-development nexus precedes the recent wave of optimism about one of the nexus’ most debated aspects, remittances (De Haas 2010). However, the current recognition of the heterogeneous character of migration-development interactions affirms the need to look for multi-dimensional, context-specific explorations of remittances. These explorations involve questions like: how do families in particular localities value remittances? What are their ideas about accessing and using them? What options and obstacles do they face? What kind of investments are needed to reach remittances’ potential? And when are they considered to have failed? Instead of merely assuming remittances (Glick Schiller & Faist 2010; Eversole 2005; Raghuram 2007), especially in terms of attractive macro figures, questions like these may further open up the process of remittances and draw attention to the kind of development under scrutiny.

Explorations of the remittances process tend to focus on migrants’ sacrifices and difficult conditions, such as degrading work and family separation. This paper follows an actor-oriented approach, and calls by scholars like De Haas (2014) and Gasper and Truong (2010; see also Nussbaum 2011: 143) to focus on migrants’ capabilities: how do they manage to generate and mobilize remittances despite these conditions? According to Sen (1999), capabilities are a person's freedoms, what he or she is able to do and be in order to lead the life he or she has reason to value. Capabilities are constitutive of as well as instrumental to development because they are both primary end and principal means to achieving other development aspirations. For example, in terms of migration, De Haas & Rodríguez (2010) argue that mobility is a capability, valuable on its own, but also instrumental to realizing other aspirations when it gets converted into actual migration, its associated achievement. The strength of a capabilities perspective on migration lies in its potential for exploring how
people strive after what they value, considering multiple capabilities, as well as what they value, taking into account opportunities and limitations of a particular context (Trager 2005). A capabilities perspective thus restores migrants’ agency in both defining and achieving development aspirations.

This paper focuses on migrants' skills as key (but not only) capabilities for generating and mobilizing remittances in order to fulfil local migration expectations. In the migration-development debate, discussions of skills have generally been limited to 'elite mobility' (Williams 2006), even if older literature considered broader and informal skill development an important tenet of migration (Raghuram 2007). A rigid differentiation between so-called low-skilled (or even ‘unskilled’) and high-skilled migrants tends to ignore the importance of tacit skills and the contextual relevance of all skills (Black et al. 2003; Erel 2010; Robinson & Carey 2000). This differentiation also seems to imply that among migrants that are not highly skilled in terms of formal qualifications, no skill development takes place (Olesen 2002). To the contrary, this paper acknowledges that any migration process can enable (tacit) skill development (Williams & Baláž 2005). Moreover, skills that have been acquired and developed during the migration process can be mobilized ‘at home’ (Cassarino 2004). This is not to ignore the fact that during the remittances process, migrants may face insecure and exploitative conditions that undervalue, limit and sometimes even harm their capability set (Williams 2009). But these conditions do not preclude skill development. Rather, the way in which migrants negotiate these conditions through skills is of interest for understanding remittances.

**Remittances for Muy Muy: differences and similarities between Costa Rica and Spain**

In Muy Muy, a village of about 15,000 people in the cattle and agriculture-dominated central region of Nicaragua, remittances are traditionally used to counter local job instability (Winters 2014). These remittances originate in a diversity of localities, ranging from nearby municipalities to the wider Central American region and countries overseas. The most recent surveys show that about 4% of households receive international remittances (INIDE 2008), but considering the informality and volatility of migration processes, and the high incidence of migration within national borders, the total level of remittances is probably much higher (OIM 2013). Moreover, little is known about the ways migrants generate and mobilize

---

5 Following the multi-dimensional and contextual premise of the capabilities perspective, the paper does not intend to argue that skills are the only capabilities indicating and influencing migrants’ achievements. Nor are the skills described here exhaustive.
remittances from these different localities. This paper takes a closer look at well-established, recurring migration to Costa Rica and more recent migration to Spain. These two migration processes are internally diversified, but they are also uniquely characterized by certain distinguishing features, which I briefly describe below.

Temporary migration to Costa Rica is one of Muy Muy’s most prevalent and perpetual migration processes. Historically situated in the broader Central American context, migration to Costa Rica has been linked to regional interdependencies in the labor market, political turmoil, armed conflict, natural disasters, neoliberal economic restructuring, and shifts in gender and class relations (Fouratt 2014; Morales 2011; Sandoval-García 2013). Research participants find migration to Costa Rica relatively accessible in terms of distance, entrance, and costs. They find work in agriculture, construction, and the service sector. Although historically, more males migrated to Costa Rica, in tune with ongoing ‘feminization’ of this particular migration process (Castro 2011), fieldwork in Muy Muy suggests it is now common for both men and women to migrate to Costa Rica.

In contrast, Spain is a more recent and female-dominated destination country. Since the 1990s, a number of dynamics converged to create a Spanish labor market attractive for migrants, particularly women: the country’s expanding economy, relatively porous borders, large informal economy, growing female labor market participation, population ageing, substantial sector of domestic employment, and lack of state intervention (León 2010). Male migrants found ample employment in the booming construction sector. Immigrant labor in Spain was further marked by a growing ‘Latin-Americanization’ and, despite a number of regularizations, ‘irregular’ forms of employment. Since 2008, the global economic crisis has severely yet unevenly affected the Spanish labor market (Domínguez-Mujica et al. 2012). In general, formal employment (particularly in the construction sector) decreased whereas informal work increased. Although the crisis urged the Spanish government to tighten immigration permits and encourage voluntary return, and the level of immigration and remittances dropped, Spain still has a positive immigration rate. In the case of Muy Muy women who migrate to Spain, they are usually part of families with substantial financial and material assets. Since this intercontinental journey requires significant investments, they need their families’ savings or asset-based loan opportunities for reaching and entering Spain.

Despite differences in migration to Costa Rica and Spain, in practice, research participants’ goals for both countries are quite similar. They mostly aim to find a job and earn

---

6 Both migrants and their surroundings expect more (monetary) rewards from migrating to Spain, considering the possibility of higher earnings compared to Costa Rica. However, migration costs for Spain are also much
money in order to attain debt repayment and/or savings, quality housing and entrepreneurship, achievements that reflect local migration expectations but do not preclude other personal goals (like travelling). Debt repayment includes both large loans and daily expenses for food and appliances, health and education. Improving and building houses are highly desired, tangible proofs of remittances, and starting a (successful) business is a dream of many. However, it is not self-evident to generate and mobilize the money needed for these achievements. Common comments on remittances, for example, that they are ‘solo para la comida’ [just for the food] or nada grande [nothing big], and that eventually, they depend on the voluntad [goodwill] of the migrants, indicate that remittances have their limitations. So, what are the dynamics that intervene? In this particular context, what enables migrants to generate remittances, and what enables migrants to mobilize remittances’ potential for fulfilling local migration expectations?

_Ganarse el patron._7 Pleasing employers and securing jobs

Research participants’ observations of remittances’ limitations generally reveal structural insecurities about the increased cost of living and unstable investment opportunities in the Muy Muy context. But research participants also indicate that a migrant's remittances achievements depend on his or her personal skills, the skill to please an employer in particular. Take the case of Cedro (25-30)8 and his common-law wife Estefani, who both have ample working experience in Costa Rica. When I visited Cedro in Quepos, a tourist town where he worked in the construction sector, he told me that Estefani has had 'bad luck' in her migration endeavors. According to him, this is because “ella no dura en los trabajos” [she does not last in her jobs] (interview 4 March 2011, CR). He continued to describe her 'bad luck' by linking it to her inability to adapt to a job and please her employers: “Maybe she is very direct, or she gets bored easily, or she is very talkative and maybe not everyone can deal with that.” This has contributed to a pattern in which both Estefani and her employers grow dissatisfied. Estefani quits or loses her job and consequently, her income. Her lack in skills to

---

7 To ‘win over’ your employer.

8 All names in this article are pseudonyms. I make use of age ranges of five years in order to most accurately reflect the ages of research participants over multiple years of research. I refer to the location of research participants by using MM for Muy Muy, CR for Costa Rica, and SP for Spain.
please an employer have become a limiting factor in her migration’s potential for generating remittances.

The skill to please your employer requires a sustained effort on behalf of migrants. In both Costa Rica and Spain, where so-called low-skilled migrants in volatile sectors seem easily replaceable, research participants have to stand out positively among many migrants competing for the better jobs. It is essential to make a good impression, as can be seen in the case of León (25-30). When I first met León in Muy Muy in 2009, he had just come home to his common-law wife and son after working various months in the Costa Rican construction sector. He told me that his and other construction projects had been put on hold because of the economic crisis. But he was confident that he had pleased his employer and would be offered a new job shortly: “I expect a call as soon as the work is resumed” (interview 2 July 2009, MM). Pleasing your employer also increases job security beyond construction, as the experience of Miguel (20-25) shows. I interviewed Miguel in San Isidro de Heredia, where he got a job maintaining the property of a wealthy Costa Rican because he 'left a good image' at a previous job in horticulture (interview 24 February 2011, CR). Despite his new fulltime maintenance job, Miguel said his ex-employer still ‘comes looking for him’. During our interview he showed me a text message in which his ex-employer confirmed a job agreement for the next Sunday. Migrants who are able to please their employers can hope to be offered a job again, even if they already left the employer or went back to Nicaragua.

What, then, does it mean to please your employer? As a tacit skill, it is not easily articulated. But Martín (25-30), who has been working in Costa Rica for years, gave some clues when explaining how he tried to stand out positively in order to obtain his current job. Martín initially worked with 40 construction workers, mainly Nicaraguans, building houses for wealthy foreigners in the tourist zone of Quepos. After the job was finished, the employer kept Martín on as the maintenance worker of one of the houses. Martín explained his promotion by saying, “you have to win their affection, their trust. People already live in these houses [during construction] and there are many things that could get lost... So if you're a good worker, you can benefit later” (interview 3 March 2011, CR). Summarizing the accounts of Cedro, Martín and other research participants, pleasing your employer means being trustworthy, hard-working, and not overly assertive.

The skill to please your employer is not only important for young male migrants like those described above. The skill extends to other types of migrants and beyond the strategy of keeping and improving jobs. This becomes clear in the case of Rosario (45-50), who has been

---

9 See also Tamagno (2002), on Peruvians in Italy and their ability to win employers’ affection.
working off and on in Costa Rica for many years, following in the footsteps of her eldest children. Whenever she is tired or misses her younger children too much, and when her job permits it, she goes back to Nicaragua. In Costa Rica, Rosario is a domestic worker for an employer where she left a good image and can always return to. Rosario explained: “She is like a sister to me. When I'm here [in Muy Muy] she calls me and she waits for me [to do the job]” (interview 23 February 2010, MM). When her mother-in-law suddenly passed away, Rosario could leave immediately to assist the funeral in Muy Muy, without jeopardizing her job (interview 2 March 2011, CR). Rosario believes the skill to please has also been beneficial to her daughter Kendra, who has been working as a maid in a Quepos luxury hotel for about a decade. According to Rosario, Kendra has won her bosses over, “la quieren mucho” [they love her a lot]. Rosario claims Kendra’s employers have been very 'good' to her; they even helped her obtain construction materials for a Costa Rican home. Pleasing employers thus also increases job related benefits indirectly linked to mobilizing remittances.

_Tengo que aguantar._\(^{10}\) Enduring, improving, and networking

Female research participants in Spain, all _domésticas_, also stressed the skill of pleasing employers, but they put more emphasis on the ability of _aguantar_ that it involves, that is, enduring difficult - often irregular - working and living conditions. They deal with heavy and insecure labor and cramped, over-priced apartments while tiding over time until they find a better job. The account of Blanca (20-25), who came to Spain in 2009 and is the sister of Martín mentioned earlier, is illustrative of the skill to endure. Blanca said that at first, when she had just arrived, she suffered. Without any previous experience in paid carework, she had to take care of an elderly woman who lived in an isolated village and was rude and weepy. In time, however, Blanca got used to employers’ diverse demands. At the time of our interview, Blanca even worked as a live-in domestic, a type of job arrangement that is generally considered very demanding. However, Blanca said, “tengo que aguantar [I have to endure]” (interview 8 August 2012, SP). Between her very first and current job, Blanca has learned that she needs to endure difficult working and living conditions in order to secure the job and remittances that make her migration worthwhile.

Next to enduring, high migration costs urge research participants to make the most of these working and living conditions, at least in monetary terms. They need to survive in a relatively expensive destination country as well as repay migration expenses and send or bring something home. In order to increase their income, research participants in Spain inform and

\(^{10}\) Tengo que aguantar. I have to endure.
recommend each other about jobs. They also take holidays that enable other migrants to fill their shifts while they can look or apply for more convenient (better-paid) jobs. For example, Blanca made use of the scarce days off in her previous job to secure her current position. She even managed to negotiate a better salary than her employer offered initially. Her sister Angela (25-30), who traveled to Spain after Blanca, explained about her recently improved job situation: “fui aprendiendo y el sueldo subiendo” [as I learned, my wage increased] (interview 4 August 2012, SP). Research participants go through a learning process in which they link skills of pleasing and enduring to improved jobs and housing.  

Research participants’ negotiations of their working and living conditions include networks in Spain but also extend to future migrants in Nicaragua. It is common to invite or accept friends and family members to join established migrants in Spain in order to share jobs and housing and lend money for migration. These interrelated dynamics can be found in Blanca’s account, who herself was invited by a friend. Blanca financed her trip to Spain with her mother’s savings, then lent her mother-in-law money to travel to Spain when she got pregnant, hoping to receive steady income from loan repayment when her pregnancy would inhibit her to work. After her baby-girl was born, Blanca also invited her older sister Angela to help take care of the baby. In addition, Blanca introduced Angela to the night shift of her then domestic work. At the time of the interview, Blanca was thinking about ‘bringing’ another sister\(^\text{11}\) to take over her day shift because she found a new job. Conveniently, both sisters would share in the cost of Blanca’s apartment as well.\(^\text{12}\) This way, by activating cross-border networks, migrants are able to gradually increase migration returns.  

Like pleasing, enduring, and improving, networking is a skill that some migrants are better at than others. Also, migrants can find themselves in circumstances that make it difficult to develop or benefit from networks. Although social network problems were not the focus of fieldwork, research participants hinted at dynamics that impeded fruitful networking. For example, working as a live-in domestic reduces opportunities for socializing, creating a condition which Elda (20-25) refers to as feeling like “un pájaro en jaula” [a bird in a cage] (interview 13 August 2012). During her two and a half years in Spain, Elda also experienced problems within her network, when a co-worker started gossiping about another co-worker in order to get her fired. Elda did not want to participate in the slander and ended up being fired.  

\(^\text{11}\) At the time of writing, this sister was indeed working in Spain.  

\(^\text{12}\) Even when working as a live-in domestic, migrants still need a place to go during weekends, a place that can also serve as a (temporary) back-up when they lose their job.
herself. Experiences like these limit remittances, whereas developing fruitful networks can stimulate them.

**No trabajarle a nadie.** Towards applying skills 'at home'

This section moves ‘home’, to address the possibilities for applying skills acquired during migration to mobilize remittances in Muy Muy. Next to the tacit skills described above, research participants also acquire basic professional skills that contribute directly or indirectly, via a more secure future income, to achieving their migration goals. Martina (30-35), who lives with her husband and two children in Nicoya, is one of the research participants who benefitted from such skills (interview 20 February 2011, CR). Martina comes from a very humble, largely self-sufficient rural family and did not finish primary school. But the work experience she accumulated as an internal migrant in Nicaragua taught her basic mathematics skills. These not only gave Martina the ability and confidence to take on a well-paid job in a *soda*, a small Costa Rican restaurant, enabling her to generate remittances, but can also help her to mobilize these remittances for her goal of setting up a store or eatery in Muy Muy.

Another example of basic professional skills concerns construction-related skills, which are considered particularly useful because they help migrants construct and improve their families’ houses in Muy Muy. Miguel (20-25), who claims that before coming to Costa Rica “no sabía nada” [I did not know anything] (interview 24 February 2011, CR), has benefitted in this sense. Originally a farmer, in Costa Rica Miguel has worked in a number of occupations, including construction and maintenance. At the time of the interview, he followed a course to get qualified as an electrician. In October 2014 I visited his mother in Muy Muy and she proudly showed me all the renovations he had done. Basic professional skills that research participants acquire during their migration process thus improve their employability (Williams 2009), enable better jobs with better wages, and increase the chance of successfully mobilizing their remittances.

Tacit and basic professional skills are both useful for generating and mobilizing remittances. However, they are not quite enough for a common Muy Muy dream and a classic example of a so-called productive migration investment: starting a business. Henry (25-30) was one of the few research participants who, based on his migration experience and earnings in Costa Rica, managed to open an apparently successful business during the fieldwork period. His small restaurant caught my attention because his dishes were original and he never

---

13 To not work for anybody (or, to be your own boss).
seemed to be without customers. Henry told me that at the age of twenty, he decided to go to Costa Rica to “probar el ambiente”, get a taste of what it is like over there. In a hotel in northern Costa Rica, a brother got him a job as a cook. Working with colleagues from Mexico and Cuba and serving an international clientele, Henry learned to prepare many different dishes. After six years in Costa Rica, he got tired of his demanding employers and being away from home. Back in Muy Muy he noticed a booth in the park was empty, applied for renting it and turned it into a small restaurant with the money he was able to save in Costa Rica. In the future, Henry would like to extend his business, opening another restaurant and some cabins on the green outskirts of Muy Muy (interview 12 October 2010, MM).

His work in a Costa Rican restaurant not only enabled Henry to generate remittances, but also to mobilize these in Muy Muy. The restaurant skills gained in Costa Rica allow him to offer something different in Muy Muy. He not only serves the traditional rice and beans, but also the more exotic ceviche (a seafood dish typical for coastal regions) and fresh batidos (milkshakes). However, other factors also contribute to Henry's success in mobilizing remittances. First, Henry made clear that he is not easily satisfied. He always aims to seguir adelante, get ahead, and be his own boss. Second, Henry has been surrounded by a demanding and entrepreneurial family. From a young age his mother taught him how to cook and he had to help with household chores. One of his brothers has a bakery, a sister runs a business in soft drinks and his mother trades in spices. Third, Henry seems to enjoy a favorable position in the village. When Henry applied at the Muy Muy municipality to rent the park booth, the mayor gave him preference. In sum, Henry's migration achievements rest in part on a favorable environment constituted by personal ambition, an entrepreneurial family, and friendly relations with the village's institutional powers. Still, his newly acquired restaurant skills were a key intervening factor while generating remittances in Costa Rica and particularly, while mobilizing them ‘at home’.

Learning the dynamics of the migration process: considering translocal habitus

Generating and mobilizing remittances require active and diverse engagements at different stages of the migration process. Particularly during the initial stages in Costa Rica and Spain, research participants try to please and endure in order to keep their job, increase their chances

14 At the time of my last research stay in Muy Muy, during October 2014, his booth was still up and running in a context where many small businesses come and go.

15 From a capabilities perspective, people's actual achievements eventually depend on enabling and limiting social, personal and environmental conversion factors (Robeyns 2005).
of promotion, and negotiate working hours and salaries. They also look for flexibility. In Costa Rica, research participants highly appreciate the kind of jobs and sympathetic employers that allow them to travel to Nicaragua for major holidays or family commitments and emergencies. In Spain, research participants appreciate the possibility of introducing others to their work and taking time off for paperwork or job hunts. Pleasing and enduring contribute to job stability, quality and flexibility, eventually enabling and increasing remittances.

Research participants’ ability to use translocal networks and newly acquired basic professional skills further enhances their migration returns. In Spain, research participants learn how to activate translocal networks for sharing jobs, rent, and migration costs. Those in Costa Rica emphasize basic professional skills that, within a conducive environment, can help them mobilize their remittances in Muy Muy. The use of these translocal networks and basic professional skills is not exclusive to one destination country. For example, migrants in Costa Rica also make use of cross-border networks and migrants in Spain also perform jobs that teach skills like cooking and painting. However, higher migration costs in Spain and greater occupational diversity in Costa Rica may contribute to a stronger articulation of activating translocal networks in Spain and developing basic professional skills in Costa Rica.

Of all skills described in this paper, it are mostly research participants who try to increase remittances by employing skills of pleasing and enduring who may unintentionally put their immediate individual well-being at risk (Tamagno 2002). This is because employment of certain capabilities, like endurance, can imply a sacrifice of others, like health and social inclusion. In Costa Rica, for example, skills for pleasing and enduring coincide with adverse stereotypes of Nicaraguans, who are said to be docile and work hard. Like the owner of a hostel in Heredia told me: “[Nicaraguans] are good workers. When they have to start at five in the morning they get there at five in the morning, until seven at night trabajan como caballos [they work like horses]. When they look for work, they arrive with the right clothes and shoes and lunch, so that they can start immediately” (interview 25 February 2011, CR). In the remittances process, research participants’ compliance with this image coupled with their relatively vulnerable position based on ethnic and civil inequalities, entails a risk of exploitation. This risk is present for both men and women in different occupations and comes in many shapes, ranging from getting paid too little and restricted movement to verbal and physical abuse.
The paper does not intend to downplay migrants' experiences of this risk, but tries to view them through a wider lens of migrants’ opportunities and limitations in striving after what they value (see also Briones 2009). This wider lens builds on Kelly and Lusis’ (2006) notion of ‘transnational habitus’, in which migrants' different capitals (economic, social, cultural) and evaluations of these capitals are integrated and provide a logic of their - sometimes contradictory - experiences. Habitus, as put forward by Bourdieu (1990), is a set of durable principles, common-sense knowledge based on past experiences, that outline what is possible and probable and generate people's actions. A habitus also provides the context in which people’s economic, social, and cultural capital is given meaning, valued and evaluated (Kelly & Lusis 2006). Migrants operate in an extended and enriched habitus that needs to be unraveled in order to understand migrants’ differentiated experiences.

Research participants’ skills can be considered part of what has been termed mobile embodied cultural capital (ibid) or migration-specific cultural capital (Erel 2010). Mobile embodied or migration-specific cultural capital captures migrants’ learned familiarity and employment of social and professional norms prevalent in a destination context. This includes mastering a foreign language (or accent), attitude and work ethics. It also includes awareness of 'being' a certain ethnicity and taking advantage of ethnic stereotyping. For example, research participants in Costa Rica try to make the most of their image of hard-working Nicaraguans, while those in Spain, compared to non-Latin American immigrants, act on their cultural closeness to Spanish families.

Migrants' skills are not isolated from their social and economic capital, as can be seen in Henry’s case. Moreover, the value of their skills in relation to their social and economic capital differs according to context, an interdependence that becomes clearer from a translocal perspective. Throughout a migration trajectory, different spatial and social contexts intervene and affect the value of migrants' diverse capitals (Kelly and Lusis 2006: 834). It follows that migrants weigh different types of capitals in terms of their migration goals. For example, when viewed through a translocal lens, degrading work conditions in a destination country are rationalized against much-needed earnings for a migrant's family 'at home' (ibid: 840). This exchange value also applies within single forms of capital. Skills that are valued highly in

16 But see for example Sandoval-García, 2004; 2011, for examples of the Costa Rican context.

17 In this sense, the way migrants in this paper employ skills could be compared to what Kothari (2008) calls ‘nonelite, strategic cosmopolitanism’, a notion of migrants’ temporally and spatially developed resources and strategies, or migrant expertise, that helps them deal with uncertain circumstances, but also leads them to accept adverse conditions. (However, Kothari’s analysis is confined to the boundaries of Barcelona, the temporary home city of the migrants, and does not explicitly take migrants’ ‘origin home’ into account.)
certain contexts, may value less elsewhere. For example, professional skills like cooking, obtained in a low-paid, low-esteemed migrant job, may be worth much more in Nicaragua, where it can be used for starting-up a restaurant. By employing certain skills, research participants may either sacrifice or enhance other capitals and capabilities, resulting in a trade-off between immediate well-being and (future) money.

By virtue of their migration, the habitus in which research participants operate becomes translocalized (ibid). The extent to which research participants master relevant skills within such a translocalized habitus influences their ability to generate and mobilize remittances. Cedro, for example, indicated his common-law wife Estefani is not able to please her employers, which makes her lose income. Some migrants gradually develop relevant skills, through personal experience and examples of others. But there are also migrants who seem unable to engage in this learning process. Anabel (20-25), whose husband has ample regional migration experience, suggested her friend and neighbor Carola (20-25) is one of those migrants. When I asked her why she thought Carola and her mother have not been able to substantially generate and mobilize remittances, despite the family's migration endeavors, Anabel answered: “Because they don’t think about getting ahead. [Carola] does not last in her jobs. And when one is working, the other one is at home. And just one son working in Costa Rica... That’s never enough for an entire family!” (Interview 9 February 2011, MM). Carola has difficulty in pleasing and enduring her employers, and her family has not been able to activate their translocal networks (for example, for help with future migrations). This makes Carola’s family unsuccessful in terms of local migration expectations. Interpreting migrants’ experiences and endeavors as skills conveys that pleasing, enduring, improving, networking, and professionalizing are part of a learning process that not everybody is able to tackle.

Migrants’ skills are thus not only differentiated, they also differentiate migrants in terms of what they are able to achieve (Erel 2010). The notion of translocalized habitus thereby offers a further refinement of looking at the way remittances take shape, but also contributes to the capabilities perspective. Research participants move through different spatial and social contexts. These contexts' values, opportunities and limitations require them to adapt accordingly. Migrants need to learn and employ locally relevant skills in order to thrive in their migration process abroad and 'at home'. Taking into account a translocalized habitus that encompasses these skills shows how a capabilities perspective needs to be not only multi-dimensional, but also multi-contextual.
Conclusion

Amid the clew of factors that influence migrants’ remittances process, this paper identified particular skills as key capabilities for generating and mobilizing remittances. Migrants’ skills are part of so-called mobile embodied or migration specific cultural capital that gets developed within a distinctively translocal habitus. Migrants’ awareness and application of relevant skills contribute to their goals of (better) jobs, money, and investments ‘at home’. In the process, they face challenges that can only be countered from a translocal point of view, by weighing them against future returns ‘at home’.

The above also means that, even if this paper is about monetary remittances, it is about much more than money. A capabilities perspective, and an exploration of skills in particular, confirms that remittances do not flourish out of thin air. Their often impressive macro figures are built on migrants’ changing capabilities. For research on remittances and accompanying capabilities to be as productive as possible, it needs to take into account not only the multiple dimensions of migration and development, but also the multiple contexts through which these are shaped. Migrants’ money, embedded in expectations and efforts that get simultaneously challenged and enabled by the interconnected localities involved in migration, provides a clear example of this.

The skills described in this paper are not exhaustive, nor are skills the only capabilities involved in generating and mobilizing remittances. They do, however, provide a further refinement of personal characteristics that make migrants successful in local terms, and they demonstrate a need for opening up the skilled migration debate. The importance of skills is not limited to so-called highly skilled migrants. In terms of further research, the list of skills described here could be refined and extended, and be further connected to migrants’ social surroundings. For example, what is the role of networks (family and otherwise) in skill development? What does migrant differentiation in terms of gender, occupation and documentation mean for the trade-off in capabilities? Is it desirable, and feasible, to support migrants with skill development without compromising their other capabilities? How to avoid an emphasis on migrants’ self-help that ignores society’s responsibility for their structurally disadvantaged position? Finally, the paper hinted at possible connections between capabilities involved with internal and international migration. A multi-contextual capabilities perspective would be suitable for exploring these and other connections that migrants make. What migrants do and be to lead a life they have reason to value, result in translocal trade-offs that
provide useful clues for any research focused on remittances and other migration-development topics.

Acknowledgements
This research has benefitted from the Flemish Interuniversity Council VLIR-UOS, the IOB Research Fund, and the University of Antwerp. I would like to thank all research participants for sharing their experiences.

References


Inward migration is mainly from Nicaragua and neighbouring countries. The latest national census in Costa Rica (2000) counted over 200,000 immigrants, making up 9.5% of the total population. Although primarily still a country of destination, since the late 1990s Costa Rica has increasingly experienced emigration notably to the United States. At the time of the census around 87,000 Costa Ricans lived abroad. Between them the governments of Costa Rica and Nicaragua have joined efforts to develop mechanisms to protect immigrant workers, and signed bilateral agreements in 1995 and 2002 regarding documentation and labour guarantees for Nicaraguan workers recruited by companies in Costa Rica.

Nicaraguan migrants send over US$1 billion home each year. This money has played a changing role in domestic politics first boosting the Ortega regime and, now, sustaining the uprising against him. While Nicaragua has prospered financially under his leadership, my research finds that migrants living in Costa Rica, the U.S. and Spain also greatly boosted the domestic economy by sending home millions of dollars each year. Roughly 16 percent of the country’s population lives abroad. Today an estimated 500,000 Nicaraguans live in Costa Rica, and more are fleeing the country’s political chaos every day. Remittances, in both Nicaragua and other developing countries, have social benefits beyond keeping individual households out of poverty. Country Profile: Nicaragua. Nicaraguan migration has been shaped by an array of political and economic factors that, over time, have produced sizable populations of Nicaraguans living in countries such as the United States and Costa Rica. Manuel Orozco. Director. Although there are more Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica, a larger volume of remittances come from the U.S. Moreover, increases from Spain have been significant in the past couple of years. The Costa Rica-Nicaragua remittance corridor remains one of the most important south-to-south corridors in the Americas, and accounts for over 50% of all remittance flows between Central American countries. The economic impact of Nicaraguan migration on Nicaragua’s economy is.