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Transnational migrant entrepreneurs: understanding their dependencies, fragilities, and alternatives

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ABSTRACT

Recent research highlights that the activities of migrant entrepreneurs increasingly extend beyond national borders, thus making them relevant actors of globalization. Nevertheless, the socio-spatial conditions that frame their cross-border activities are still poorly understood. The aim of this article is twofold: first, we apply the lens of ‘globalization from below’ to study small-scale transnational migrant entrepreneurs (TMEs), thereby providing new insights into less visible globalization processes; second, we show that TMEs are not simply free economic agents but depend on connections in local and transnational spaces. Inspired by the literature on dependencies and feminist approaches, we develop a typology to address the following research question: Under which conditions is relying on others beneficial for transnational migrant entrepreneurship, and under which conditions does it lead to precariousness? Building on 86 semi-structured interviews in Colombia, Spain, and Switzerland, we uncover the diverse nature of dependencies and reveal the unequal opportunities TMEs face.

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Globalization from below; dependencies; transnational entrepreneurship; migration; social inequality

1. Introduction

Globalization is not only driven by large transnational corporations and powerful political institutions, but also by ordinary, often ‘invisible’ individuals who contribute to processes of ‘globalization from below’ (Mathews et al., 2012). This article focuses on small-scale transnational migrant entrepreneurs (TMEs) who travel and move goods, services, capital, and/or ideas across national borders (Portes et al., 2002). Although TMEs do not operate at the scale of global corporations or have the same degree of organizational complexity, we view them as relevant actors of globalization because they connect distant places and people across the world. We thereby refer to globalization not only as an economic phenomenon, but also as a social and cultural process involving multiple interconnected actors and complex power geometries (Massey, 2005). Furthermore, in line with Mathews et al. (2012), we argue that if we strive to achieve a comprehensive understanding of ‘the current world-system, then we need to take globalization from below as seriously as we take globalization from above’ (2012, p. 2).

We build on the observation that transnational business opportunities can improve the livelihoods of migrants (Harima & Baron, 2020), but that the various socio-spatial conditions they face remain poorly understood (Sandoz et al., 2022; Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021). Our aim is twofold.

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First, we draw from the literature on ‘globalization from below’, which focuses on the transnational strategies and daily activities of less privileged individuals, to study the diversity of situations experienced by small-scale TMEs, thereby providing new insights into less visible globalization processes. Second, we show that TMEs are not simply free economic agents but depend on diverse connections in local and transnational spaces. Inspired by the critique of the individual conceptualized as isolated, independent, and self-interested, we build on the literature on ‘dependencies’ (Evans, 2001; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003) and feminist approaches that highlight the relational and reciprocal dimension of social interactions across the globe (Parekh & Wilcox, 2020; Suralová, 2015; Webster & Haandrikman, 2017). This enables us to study the interplay between different forms of dependencies and inequalities among TMEs and to address the following research question: *Under which conditions is relying on others productive and beneficial for transnational migrant entrepreneurship, and under which conditions does it lead to fragilities and precariousness?* Building on a qualitative study of 86 TMEs in Colombia, Spain, and Switzerland, we uncover the diverse nature of their dependencies and contribute to a deeper understanding of the unequal opportunities that migrants face while striving to build transnational businesses.

Following the introduction, the second part of the article reviews the literature and presents research gaps. The third part introduces our analytical framework, while the fourth presents our methodological approach. The fifth proposes a typology of dependencies based on the analysis of our empirical data. The sixth discusses the proposed typology, followed by a conclusion that sets the findings in a broader context.

2. State of the art

2.1. TMEs between autonomy and constraints

Recent research recognizes the increasingly transnational character of migrant entrepreneurship (Zapata-Barrero & Rezaei, 2020). Combining insights from the social sciences and business studies, scholars examine how migrants use socio-spatial knowledge of multiple places to identify market gaps and develop entrepreneurial projects (Harima & Baron, 2020; Sandoz et al., 2022), emphasizing that they mobilize resources across borders to achieve socio-economic advancement (Fuller-Love & Akiode, 2020). Yet, research approaches that uncritically celebrate entrepreneurship, individual responsibility, and independence remain dominant (Mancinelli, 2020), as the notion of entrepreneurship is rooted in managerial discourses of individualization and self-realization (Webster & Haandrikman, 2017). Such approaches fail to recognize that TMEs are not isolated individuals but rely on a web of social and economic connections (Solano, 2020). Migrant entrepreneurs require a certain degree of autonomy to organize transnational businesses, but they also need stable social connections and access to relevant resources and infrastructure (Sandoz, 2021).

Moreover, research on transnational entrepreneurship tends to focus on migrants with high levels of education (Harima & Baron, 2020) and conceptualizes TMEs as homogeneous (Portes & Martinez, 2020). A more subtle account of the socio-spatial conditions that create different transnational opportunities is needed (Sandoz et al., 2022). This is particularly important in the context of globalization, where resources are unequally distributed across geographical space and social groups, thus constraining equitable economic success (Riaño et al., 2022).

We are aware that definitions of TMEs remain highly debated (Harima & Baron, 2020; Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021). Although many authors conceptualize entrepreneurship based on fixed traits and characteristics, we adopt a processual approach (Gartner, 1988) and understand TMEs as

individuals with migration experience who (formally or informally) move goods, services, capital, and/or ideas across national borders to sustain livelihoods and fulfil personal aspirations. In this article, we include individuals with diverse types of businesses, from different socio-economic levels and geographical settings. This inclusive perspective highlights different situations in which small-scale transnational business activities take place, the unequal opportunities individuals face while conducting them, and the gray zone between ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ globalization processes.

2.2. TMEs as actors of globalization from below

Literature on ‘globalization from below’ lends important but scant insights into TMEs. Portes (2000) used the term to examine the informal economic activities of TMEs who take advantage of different locational opportunities in former and current residence countries. Similarly, Tarrius (2002) identified the emergence of transnational trade networks operated by working-class migrants through informal and illegal channels. Mathews et al. (2012) explain ‘globalization from below’ as a recent phenomenon caused by the liberalization and deregulation of the global economy, the growth of liberal democracy, an increase in international migration flows and social inequality, and the revolution of information and communication technologies. Empirically, Mathews and Alba focus on marginalized social groups conducting informal transnational businesses, such as micro-scale traders and street hawkers. They view these activities as a strategy to cope with the difficulties of accessing paid employment and benefit from the structures set by ‘globalization from above’ actors.

By shedding light on the transnational day-to-day practices of informal traders, the ‘globalization from below’ lens unveils ‘less hegemonic’ and ‘more mundane streams of global traffic and local connection’ (Knowles, 2014, p. 188). This perspective also uncovers the impact of global power relations and social inequalities on the mobilities of cross-border entrepreneurs, and it highlights the agentic strategies of individuals to navigate obstacles. However, categorizing globalization as from ‘above’ or ‘below’ establishes a dichotomic view of economic practices (formal/informal; legal/illegal; marginalized/privileged) even though ‘back-roads’ globalization often and actively intersects with ‘main-roads’ globalization (Knowles, 2014). Positioning marginalized or delegitimized economic activities as opposed to more conventional forms of business overshadows the complex connections between formal and informal spheres of entrepreneurship (Routh, 2014). Furthermore, globalization from below excludes the transnational practices of small-scale TMEs operating within formal and legal frameworks, and neglects the interplay between various disadvantages, potentials, and opportunities resulting from diverse social positions. In this article, we aim to shed light on these intersections.

2.3. TMEs and dependencies across borders

To enhance our understanding of globalization from below, we propose an analysis of the diversity of situations that small-scale TMEs experience, and the local and transnational connections they rely upon. We view the notion of ‘dependency’ as a useful tool to capture the multiple relations—often informal and loaded with unequal power—involved in globalization from below, and to show that such relations can be helpful but also constraining for entrepreneurs.

Prebisch (1950) first used ‘dependency’ as a concept to explain the process of dependent development that results when resources flow from a ‘periphery’ of low-income countries to a ‘core’ of wealthy countries, enriching the latter at the expense of the former. In this context dependency is defined as ‘the inequality of power and forms of economic domination that characterizes the

relations between rich and poor countries' (Calhoun, 2002). Later, the concept was refined to include not only asymmetrical relations between countries, but also between different organizations, social groups, and individuals, both within and across nations (Evans, 2001). Broadly, a dependency can be conceptualized as a 'relationship in which one or more social actors are reliant on another social actor' (Jeanes, 2019).

The concept has already been used in entrepreneurship studies. Resource dependency theory proposes that corporations which rely on external resources are 'constrained by webs of dependence relationships with other organizations that can exercise power' (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003, p. 44). However, this theory focuses on large European and American companies and its analysis of dependencies is bi-directional rather than multi-directional. We therefore propose an engagement with feminist perspectives on dependencies (Parekh & Wilcox, 2020; Souralová, 2015). These approaches instead focus on the interconnections between individuals and highlight the reciprocal and care-based dimension of relationships while simultaneously drawing attention to the power geometries that characterize them. By emphasizing links between the professional and the private, structural elements and people's subjectivities, they provide fruitful and thought-provoking tools to question dominant discourses of independence and individual success in entrepreneurship (Mancinelli, 2020). Furthermore, they highlight the importance of interconnections and emotional bonds in enabling or disabling entrepreneurial projects (Webster, 2020; Webster & Haandrikman, 2017).

3. Analytical framework: dependencies, fragilities, and alternatives

The presented literature leads to first assumptions about the local and transnational connections that TMEs rely upon and enables us to develop an analytical framework to understand the interplay between different forms of dependencies and inequalities. In this section, we draw attention to key aspects of our approach.

First, we do not analyze TMEs in purely economic terms but strive to understand their personal aspirations and lived experiences. According to certain authors (Portes et al., 2002; Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021), an entrepreneur is first and foremost motivated by the desire to generate an income to fulfil basic needs (e.g. food, shelter, medical care, basic services) and maximize profit. Yet, an entrepreneur may also be motivated by the desire to fulfil personal aspirations, such as reaching a sense of ontological security (a sense of order and continuity without chaos and anxiety; Giddens, 1991), a sense of place (human attachment and belonging as opposed to fear and insecurity; Tuan, 1980), reconciling unpaid (domestic) and paid work (Webster & Zhang, 2020), personal commitment to a community (Osaghae & Cooney, 2020), symbolic recognition (Munkejord, 2017), or the desire to innovate (Harima & Vermuri, 2015). While a focus on the economic motivations of TMEs emphasizes an individualistic view on entrepreneurship, considering other aspirations allows us to understand the context in which they live, as well as their interconnectedness with others and dependency on external resources (Webster, 2020; Webster & Haandrikman, 2017).

Second, we aim to capture the diversity of local and transnational connections that TMEs rely upon. As other authors have shown (Chen & Tan, 2009; Solano, 2020), accessing the necessary resources for developing a business may include relying on specific *social networks* (relationships between individuals, groups, organizations) that facilitate access to economic capital, goods, knowledge, services, and infrastructure. Yet, it may also require a specific *geographical location* with access to reliable transportation infrastructure, institutional support systems, safe environments, and trading hubs (Schäfer & Henn, 2018). For some entrepreneurs, *spatial mobility* may be a

condition for conducting business, thus making them dependent on specific national and international mobility regimes, intermediaries, and infrastructures (Riaño et al., 2022; Sandoz et al., 2022). Finally, access to *institutional support* is important for many entrepreneurs, as it enables them to access financing, training, and networking through the support services provided by central or local governments, NGOs, professional networks, and international organizations (Liswoska & Stabuskawsju, 2014).

Third, we want to understand under which conditions dependencies may enhance or constrain transnational business development. Here, we build on the argument that dependencies are characterized by the socio-economic and symbolic power of the actors involved (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Thereby they are shaped by factors including class, gender, race, and geographical location, whose intersection influences the specific position of the actors involved and their ability to engage in mutually fruitful relations (Souralová, 2015). Unequal dependencies emerge when power is utilized in a manner that diminishes the profits of less powerful actors while enlarging the profits of more powerful actors (Massey, 2005). Such dependencies may be limiting and exploitative, thus creating fragilities for the weaker party. A fragility is shaped by risks and vulnerabilities, which may range from uncertainty about the future to complete loss of a relationship or entrepreneurial project. In contrast, relationships based on reciprocity, whether material or symbolic, may result in valuable and sustainable entrepreneurial resources, thus strengthening all involved (Parekh & Wilcox, 2020; Souralová, 2015). To avoid becoming dependent on exploitative relationships, entrepreneurs may mobilize strategies and defensive mechanisms to create new opportunities. Thus, to understand whether a dependency is emancipatory or constraining, we propose considering the power relations at stake and asking what alternatives an entrepreneur has or can develop to achieve their goals. We define alternatives as ways of expanding one's options, gaining security, and thereby mitigating the risks involved with fragile dependencies.

Figure 1 illustrates our analytical framework for this article. We focus on how *dependencies* (towards social networks, geographical locations, spatial mobility, and institutional support) interact with *fragilities* (the level of risk and vulnerability associated with these relations), and *alternatives* (strategies to mitigate risks and expand options). By analyzing our empirical data within this framework, we provide a better understanding of which conditions make dependencies productive and beneficial for TMEs, and which conditions lead to fragilities and precariousness.

4. Methodological approach

Empirically, this paper is based on case studies of TMEs in Colombia, Spain, and Switzerland. Our fieldwork, conducted between 2018 and 2020, includes 86 biographical and semi-structured interviews combined with ethnographic research (Flick, 2006). The first author conducted fieldwork in Barcelona, where she interviewed 22 TMEs from diverse backgrounds (digital nomads, knowledge workers, small business owners, street traders) and conducted ethnographic observations in co-working spaces, shops, and retail locations used by migrant entrepreneurs. The second author conducted 34 interviews with TMEs in Zurich and carried out ethnographic observations within a local NGO that supports migrant and refugee entrepreneurs. The third author conducted ethnographic fieldwork at the Venezuelan-Colombian border (Cúcuta-San Antonio) and interviewed 30 individuals running mostly informal businesses. We developed common guidelines for the semi-structured interviews, which focused on migration and business creation stories, mobilities of people

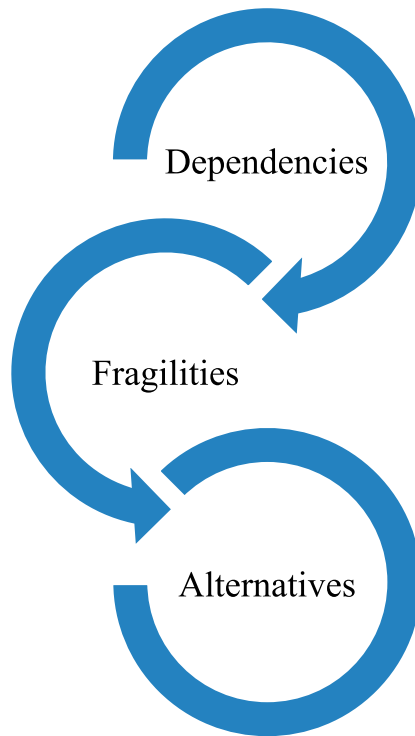


Figure 1. Analytical framework.

and other entities, the role of social and institutional networks, the importance of specific localities for entrepreneurship, and the research participants' subjective perception of their businesses. Inspired by feminist approaches challenging the power relation between researchers and research participants (Riaño, 2016), we tried when possible to engage in long-term relationships with our research participants, and organized two participatory workshops to discuss emerging hypotheses with them.

Our aim was not to conduct a strictly comparative study of three countries but rather to gain a contrasted understanding of what kinds of dependencies arise in diverse socio-spatial contexts. The locations were chosen because they exemplify three geographical contexts in which opportunities and constraints for business development differ in terms of centrality, mobility regimes, economic conditions, support measures, and quality of infrastructure. Zurich is characterized by its location in central Europe, high standard of living, safety, high population density, and quality of transportation infrastructure (Mittmasser, 2022). Yet, Switzerland has a restrictive migration regime that focuses on highly skilled workers and offers little support to small-scale entrepreneurs with limited business capital (Mittmasser & Stingl, 2021). Barcelona is also centrally located in Europe and has high population density, quality transportation infrastructure, and a vibrant start-up scene (Sandoz, 2021). Yet, in contrast to Switzerland, Spain is a less wealthy country, has a more liberal approach to regulating and controlling the spatial mobilities of migrants, and presents fewer entry barriers for small-scale entrepreneurs (Hooper, 2019). Colombia is an example of an even less wealthy country with relatively low average incomes, and is distantly located from places with better income-earning opportunities, such as Europe. The state

maintains only a limited presence in its border zones, and, in particular, the Cúcuta-San Antonio region at the Venezuelan-Colombian border is threatened by illegal armed groups and home to internally displaced people who struggle to survive through informal entrepreneurial activities (Riaño et al., 2022).

These case studies were selected following a qualitative approach, whose goal is not statistical representation or generalization, but to gain a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We applied a maximum variation sampling approach (Flick, 2006), which allows us to explore our research question from different angles and generate new knowledge through comparison and contrast. Our strategy involved selecting candidates across a spectrum of dimensions which we considered essential to empirically assess the diversity of dependencies among TMEs. We focused on individuals with migration experience (including current migrants and returnees) running cross-border businesses (from informal micro-economic activities to small-scale conventional businesses). We selected research participants whose geographical location ranged from peripheral to more central, and whose social status (class, gender, race, education level, mobility rights) encompassed more privileged as well as less privileged individuals. Despite achieving a certain degree of variety, biases in the sample could not be avoided, for example, an overrepresentation of individuals with university education and women in the Zurich sample (see Table 1). Moreover, we are aware that using the term transnational migrant entrepreneurship to describe our sample raises conceptual difficulties as it involves very different types of businesses. Yet, as previously discussed, a broader definition of the term, including both formal and informal cross-border business activities, is useful in understanding how ordinary, often 'invisible', people contribute to processes of globalization from below.

We analyzed our data collaboratively within the team. First, building on the literature presented in the previous section, we tried to understand which dependencies are relevant to our research participants, how and why they emerge, what kind of fragilities they entail and which alternatives TMEs have to mitigate them. We used these questions to analyze our interviews, applying coding techniques inspired by *Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We then organized internal workshops to discuss our data and create the typology presented in the next section. Each of us selected interviews from our case studies which we found representative of specific situations emerging from our data. We created detailed life-course descriptions of these cases, inspired by the method of biographical case reconstruction developed by Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal (2004). Our typology thus arose from the process of coding our data based on a combination of deductive and inductive categories, and then collaboratively developing in-depth analyses of specific stories. We were particularly guided by Kluge's procedure of constructing typologies (2000), who recommends the following steps: 1. Development of relevant analytical dimensions (based on research questions, theoretical knowledge, and coding of empirical data); 2. Grouping cases and analyzing empirical regularities; 3. Analysis of meaningful relationships and type construction (which includes considering further attributes, confronting individual cases with their type, and searching for contradicting cases); 4. Characterization of the constructed types (in relation to the analytical dimensions and illustrative cases). Our typology does not encompass all cases and should not be considered as static (Torr, 2008). Nevertheless, we view it as a valuable means of representing how and why differences between cases exist (Weber, 1949). Organizing our results in the form of a typology enables us to shed light on the inequalities arising between different categories of people, but we are aware that heterogeneity and contrasts also exist within each type.

Table 1. Characteristics of research participants.

	Colombia n = 30	Spain n = 22	Switzerland n = 34	Total n = 86
Gender				
Female	25	8	23	56
Male	5	14	11	30
Age				
20–29	2	6	7	15
30–39	10	5	10	25
40–49	13	6	12	31
>50	5	5	5	15
Childcare responsibilities				
Children	29	8	17	54
No children	1	14	17	32
Highest educational level				
Primary school	20	2		22
High school / college / vocational training	10	8	5	23
Bachelor's degree		2	8	10
Master's degree		10	18	28
PhD			3	3
Region of birth				
Europe		7	14	21
Middle East & Asia		3	9	12
Americas	30	7	8	45
Africa		4	3	7
Oceania		1		1
Reason for migration				
Work	1	11	8	20
Study		4	2	6
Family		4	16	20
Safety	29*	1	7	37
Lifestyle		2	1	3
Years in current country of residence				
0–5	30	7	8	45
6–10		2	16	18
11–20		7	5	12
>20		6	5	11
Main business sector				
Handicrafts/ Textiles/ Design	8	6	17	31
Community building/Education	4	2	5	11
Consulting		3	3	6
Technology		5	4	9
Food / Gastronomy	10	4	3	17
Others	8	2	2	12
Years of entrepreneurial activity				
0–2		6	17	23
3–5	30	7	9	46
>5		9	8	17

* For most participants in the Colombian case study, the need for work is closely interlinked with the need for protection. In general, many interviewees migrated for multiple reasons. Here we state only the most relevant ones.

5. Beneficial and fragile dependencies in transnational migrant entrepreneurship: a typology

Although each case is unique, the empirical analysis of our 86 interviews in relation to our research question and analytical framework enables us to identify three main types of situations that assist us in understanding under which conditions dependencies can be productive and beneficial, and under which conditions they can lead to precariousness: (1) entrepreneurs who use dependencies productively while having alternatives; (2) entrepreneurs trapped in precarious situations who struggle with fragile dependencies; and (3) entrepreneurs who manage to develop alternatives to overcome precariousness. This section presents concrete examples to

illustrate these contrasting situations, while also showing the nuances and fluidity within and across each type.

5.1. Using dependencies productively while having alternatives

Fanta Conde¹ is a 40-year-old transnational entrepreneur from Spain who runs a business selling female hygiene products. Born in a middle-class family with roots in Equatorial Guinea, she studied architecture in Barcelona and the United States, and lived for several years in her parents' country. She founded her business with a friend, first as a side activity while working as an architect in Spain and Equatorial Guinea. She says:

The two of us were architects, and we were both working, so we didn't think that we would quit our job and do only this, no. It was like a hobby that motivates you, that grows, (...) and if it becomes a business, well that's great, but there wasn't a preoccupation that we wanted to get a salary.

After a successful online crowdfunding campaign, she decided to quit her job and dedicate more time to growing the business. Her family situation also motivated her decision as she was now married with young children, and her husband took on a job in a Spanish town where she had no network connections. Nevertheless, digital technologies enabled her to stay in contact with her business partners. She believed that developing a transnational business while working from home and taking care of the children was a good option in terms of a healthy work-life balance. At the time of the interview, she divided her days between managing her business, continuing a non-profit project on Equatorial Guinea's architectural heritage, and caring for her two young children. She did not earn enough money to make a living, but she was confident about the future. Furthermore, she was keeping her professional options open by maintaining connections through her architectural project in Equatorial Guinea.

Another interviewee, Afonso Ferreira, bears similarities with Fanta Conde. The 45-year-old Portuguese man obtained a PhD in Switzerland in aerospace engineering and worked for several years for a Portuguese company connected to the European Space Agency. In 2010 he met his future Swiss girlfriend and subsequently moved with her to Zurich. Finding employment in his specialization proved difficult, but he was able to work as an independent consultant for a former employer in Portugal. At the time of the interview, he had founded a business selling his skills and knowledge as a project-based expert in aerospace engineering to European partners. This involved regular travel but enabled him to maintain residency in Zurich.

Fanta and Afonso are highly educated and specialists in their field. Becoming entrepreneurs allowed them to find a satisfying balance between their professional and personal aspirations. Both rely on network connections that they have developed across time and space to access business opportunities, and since their clients value their skills and products, they can engage in mutually profitable relations with them, and therefore feel in control of their situation. As Afonso says: *'Coming as an expert from that experience makes me, let's say, valuable for other missions.'*

These cases illustrate a situation in which TMEs experience dependencies positively while having alternatives to reorient in the future if their business fails to fulfil their aspirations. Their in-demand skill set, European nationality, professional network, and geographical location in Europe enable them to connect with others, travel freely, and use digital technologies. Due to previous employment and support from their partners, they are economically secure, which reduces their need for immediate profitability; and they can access institutional support (such as training, funding, and social security) to develop their business and support their livelihood in the event of failure.

These assets foster business development and mitigate the risks of living precariously. Under such conditions, the studied TMEs can engage in dependencies without fearing abuse and exploitation. Their risks are limited because the power relations are balanced, the dependencies are mutually profitable, and alternatives are available. For instance, both Fanta and Afonso have the option of finding other employment, starting another business, or relying on their partner's income if their entrepreneurship is not profitable. Moreover, although engaged with a partner, they are not trapped in the relationship and can maintain a degree of autonomy thanks to their skills, stable legal status, and network. TMEs of this type can thus engage in projects outside of conventional employment and career structures, and are able to take measured risks without threatening their livelihood.

5.2. Struggling with fragile dependencies in situations of precariousness

Luca Awad's story illustrates the second type of situation. He was born in the United Arab Emirates in 1980, where he studied business administration and informatics. In Dubai he held a regular job while running a real estate business on the side. Because his parents are Palestinian refugees, he was unable to obtain stable legal status in the Emirates and therefore moved to Syria when he was 25 years old. There, he continued his professional career, working for a company and creating another real estate business on the side. He also met his wife. In 2013, they fled to Lebanon because of the war, and subsequently moved to Switzerland through a UNHCR relocation programme. Unable to find a job, Luca joined a start-up incubator programme for refugees where he developed an online marketplace business project aiming to sell luxury Swiss products in the Middle East. At the time of the interview, he had set up a website and social media profiles for his business. However, he was reluctant to register officially as an entrepreneur over fears of losing Swiss social assistance. With three children, Luca considers this too risky for his family. His current dependency on social assistance means that he cannot regularly leave Switzerland, which constrains his transnational activities. He is currently seeking investors, but his priority is to find a stable job so that he can save money while growing his business slowly on the side. When we interviewed him, Luca remained in a precarious situation, trying to sustain his family with very little income while struggling to find regular employment.

Luca's case is characteristic of fragile dependencies. His precarious legal status and the unstable political situations of the countries where he previously lived have resulted in undesired im/mobilities and difficulties maintaining international connections over time. His dependency on the Swiss welfare system enables his family to survive but hinders his transnational business aspirations. He struggles to access the local labour market and has few alternatives to improve his situation.

Another example is Sandra Barroso, a 47-year-old Colombian living in Cúcuta at the Colombia–Venezuela border. At a young age, she migrated to Venezuela with her three sons to escape marital abuse and the threat of illegal armed groups. They became mobile vendors, selling coffee, handmade jewelry, and Colombian knickknacks at fairs and beaches. Their trade became transnational as they regularly travelled to Colombia to buy products. In 2015, as Venezuela's economic crisis and unstable political situation led to the violent deportation of Colombian migrants, Sandra returned to her husband's house in Cúcuta, Colombia. There she started selling stationery and handmade decorations in Colombia and Venezuela. This business only produces survival income. She receives no institutional financial support in Colombia and relies on her neighbours and networks in Venezuela to sell her products. Her livelihood depends on living near the border, as she travels regularly to Venezuela to sell her products and meet with clients. In 2019, however, the Venezuelan

government closed the border. Crossing illegally is fraught with risks, as she is regularly stopped by corrupt officials at Venezuelan border checkpoints:

I fight to the last. [I tell the police officers] that I come from so far away, that it is not fair, that my family needs it. I argue with them, but yes, they have tried to take my things away.

Sandra's situation involves several fragilities. Her neighbours are low-income individuals and thus have limited purchasing capacity. She receives financial support from NGOs, but this could end at any time. The political and security situation at the border is unstable, representing significant risks for cross-border mobility. She would like to return to Venezuela, but the food shortages, power outages, and political instabilities are discouraging. Her situation is a typical case of globalization from below in which precariousness and lack of alternatives arise from low social status, political volatility, lack of state support, and limited access to digital technologies.

These examples illustrate that not all connections benefit migrant entrepreneurs. Legal travel restrictions, family care responsibilities, economic difficulties, and political instabilities may limit a TME's entrepreneurial opportunities. Because they lack options to develop sustainable alternatives, they must make the most of their resources despite the fragilities and risks involved. While we showed previously that networks are valuable for developing a business project, our interviews with entrepreneurs in precarious situations highlight that not everyone can maintain international professional or social networks after migrating, as their movement is restricted by selective mobility regimes and a lack of access to digital technologies. Our interviews also reveal important place-based inequalities: In Zurich, Luca receives social assistance and institutional support for his start-up, which provides basic stability; in Cúcuta, where state-run institutions are absent and the political situation is volatile, Sandra's fragilities compound to exacerbate economic and ontological insecurities. The degree of encountered fragilities thus varies in different geographical locations. Finally, unbalanced dependencies relate to social position. Financial insecurity is particularly constraining, as it forces some entrepreneurs to find side jobs, limiting the time they can dedicate to their businesses. TMEs like Luca who struggle to obtain a stable position in their host countries have restricted access to economic, social, and mobility rights, which makes it particularly difficult to develop formal business activities. Under such conditions, entrepreneurs have little power to engage in mutually beneficial connections and to develop more stable alternatives.

5.3. Developing alternatives to overcome precariousness

Many of the dependencies we observed include fragilities and a lack of alternatives to avoid adverse or exploitative conditions. However, despite the risks involved, some interviewees developed creative strategies to cope with asymmetric power relations, thereby using their fragile connections productively to cultivate alternatives and expand their options. Individual strategies include: Engaging in informal practices (when formal/legal activities are impossible); expanding to new geographical sites and social networks (when existing connections are unhelpful or constraining); employing a proxy and/or labour abroad as well as digital technologies (when personal mobility is not possible or desired); improving legal status through marriage or formal employment; using relevant institutional support structures. These strategies require specific skills, knowledge, and resources, and are not available to every TME. Furthermore, they involve risks that can lead to the improvement or deterioration of living conditions, depending on factors that are often largely out of the TME's control. Nevertheless, the stories of TMEs who manage to build stability despite their initially precarious position sheds light on how fragile dependencies can sometimes lead to improvement.

Alejandro Morales is a 52-year-old man born in Otavalo, an area in Andean Ecuador renowned for its traditional indigenous handicraft enterprises. With only a primary-level education, he began travelling at 15, playing music on the streets of the Americas and Europe, and selling Otavalo crafts. He explains his motivations:

There has been a phenomenon that the vast majority of people in my area started to travel abroad [...], always with the aim of crossing borders to find better work opportunities.

During his first trip to England, Alejandro was under financial pressure to repay the debt he incurred to pay for his flight. After years of nomadic living, he married an Otavalo woman and settled in Barcelona near her family. His in-laws helped him to develop businesses, from selling handicrafts to managing bars and restaurants. On the side Alejandro engaged in musical projects and eventually founded a music studio. This gave him and his wife economic independence from her family's business. They also managed a handicraft shop where, building on a vast transnational network of handicraft producers that they developed over time, they gradually improved the quality and diversity of their products. Over the years they managed to save enough money to retire in Otavalo. This story illustrates how a combination of risky but smart choices, fruitful connections, and favourable conditions made it possible for a TME to overcome initial fragilities, build on mutually profitable dependencies, and develop new opportunities.

Vanessa Cubillo is another example of an entrepreneur who overcame some initial fragilities. She was born in 1960 in a rural area in northern Colombia. She experienced several forced mobilities resulting from domestic abuse, gang rape, and criminal assaults, including five internal displacements caused by violent armed guerrillas and paramilitary forces. Despite these setbacks, Vanessa began again each time she lost everything, finding work as a street vendor, in restaurants, and other miscellaneous ventures. In 2009, following another forced displacement and the death of her partner, Vanessa migrated to Venezuela where her eldest son lived. With her meagre savings, she purchased low-cost goods in Colombia to sell in Venezuela. Yet she was deported again to Colombia in 2015. Far from giving up, Vanessa started selling clothes and knickknacks. Eventually she obtained a survivor's pension, which allowed her to rent a house and set up a shop selling clothes and handmade perfume. Terrified by the precarious situation of victims at the border, in 2016 Vanessa created an association to help Colombians and Venezuelans who have experienced displacement, deportation, or extreme poverty:

My idea of an association, and of doing work for the community, arises from what I have lived, from the five displacements, from the gang rape, from the death of my partner, from seeing that there are people who are really needy, that there are people who do not have the same capacities as others.

She regularly travels between Venezuela and Colombia, encouraging victims of violence to participate in the professional training sessions she organizes, and to access psychological, legal, and family support. Her association receives no financial assistance from Colombian institutions and depends on international aid and collaborations with the National Apprenticeship and Employment Service, a public institution that offers free training. Vanessa is a remarkable example of a TME who has created significant opportunities for herself and others despite a poor education, low income, and devastating setbacks due to her gender and regional violence. Relying on her pension, her geographical location (at the border), her spatial mobility (in a context of danger and illegality), and her transnational economic and local institutional networks allowed her to partially counteract the fragilities she encounters and create alternatives.

These examples show how some entrepreneurs in precarious socio-spatial conditions manage to mobilize connections to access new resources and expand their options, thus gaining more power to cope with associated risks. Their situations highlight that place-based socio-economic conditions influence the degree of fragility that entrepreneurs may face: While in Colombia, Vanessa's physical integrity was in danger, the risks that Alejandro faced in Europe were economic and not life-threatening. Moreover, they reveal how the ability to move across borders can constitute a major resource for expanding one's options. Finally, they illustrate the importance of supportive networks and relationships that foster growth and autonomy. Such cases involve impressive stories of courage in the face of adversity. Yet, they also rely on the unpredictable combination of external conditions, which sometimes enable new opportunities to arise from even the most hazardous situations.

6. Discussion

Overall, our analysis reveals different situations in which TMEs rely on *social networks*, *geographical locations*, *spatial mobility*, and *institutional support*. It underlines the relational and interdependent character of human beings and calls for a rejection of individualistic views on entrepreneurship. As our framework based on dependencies, fragilities, and alternatives shows, relying on others is not beneficial or limiting per se but depends on the specific power configuration of the relationship. Whether or not our interviewees can profit from their connections is largely shaped by their social position and the geographical context in which they are embedded, as well as the alternatives they have to mitigate risks and expand options.

In terms of *social networks*, migrants integrate family members, former work colleagues, acquaintances, and friends from various countries into their business activities. These contacts facilitate access to new economic spaces, funding opportunities, moral support, and knowledge. Relying on close family members to assume care obligations and other family responsibilities, as in the case of Alejandro Morales, or depending on a partner's stable income to mitigate the financial risks associated with entrepreneurship, as in the case of Fanta Conde, are common strategies among the studied TMEs. Yet, relying on others can also be risky when the power dynamic is unbalanced, and the entrepreneur feels that their obligations exceed the benefits. For example, we observed that some migrants are pressured to send remittances or otherwise contribute to the economy of their community of origin, which may result in undesired and constraining dependencies. This is an important observation to contribute to the large body of literature insisting on the solely positive impact of networks for TMEs (e.g. Chen & Tan, 2009; Munkejord, 2017; Solano, 2020). In order to overcome this narrow focus, such networks clearly need to be re-examined in relation to the intersection of inequalities and power relations faced by specific actors in specific contexts and in relation to others (Saksela-Bergholm et al., 2019). Moreover, the role of emotional connections and trust during entrepreneurial processes needs to be considered (Sandoz et al., 2022; Webster, 2020). It is therefore important to consider entrepreneurs not only as economic actors, but also as people with emotions and intimate relationships which can create feelings of duty, obligation, and attachment, and therefore shape their decisions, aspirations, and opportunities.

Furthermore, accumulated international knowledge enables migrants to identify and strategically employ opportunities and resources in different *geographical locations*. Many TMEs rely on the advantages of specific places for production, trade, and access to institutional support to expand their options. Alejandro Morales, for example, can capitalize on his transnational network and personal mobility to select handicraft products in locations with a lower cost of living and resell them

in Barcelona for a higher price. Yet, entrepreneurs are also challenged by the constraints of specific places, which may range from limited infrastructure to life-threatening conditions. This is particularly illustrated by the cases of Sandra Barroso and Vanessa Cubillo, who faced forced mobilities, an absent state, and violence throughout their entrepreneurship. Since most studies on TMEs focus on empirical cases in Europe and North America (Sandoz et al., 2022), theoretical contributions do not consider aspects such as geographical peripherality and armed violence in limiting the opportunities of entrepreneurs. If transnational connections are a clear asset for migrant entrepreneurs (Yeung, 2009; Zapata-Barrero & Rezaei, 2020), the literature needs to acknowledge that a TME's ability to benefit from them is largely structured by place-based inequalities across the globe.

Our analysis also shows that dependencies on *spatial mobility* vary widely among TMEs. Some people, like Alejandro Morales, need to travel internationally to exchange goods, money, services, and ideas. Others, like Fanta Conde, can use digital business management technologies or have other people travel on their behalf. TMEs with a European nationality or residence permit benefit from relative freedom of movement, whereas TMEs from poorer countries are restricted by selective migration policies or political instabilities. Gender also plays an important role in facilitating or restricting mobilities, as people with care duties—traditionally women—have fewer options to travel compared to people without dependents. Furthermore, women are particularly physically endangered while travelling in politically unstable locations, such as the Colombian-Venezuelan border. These factors structure the ability of TMEs to use, build, and maintain mutually beneficial connections across places and through time. While most typologies of transnational migrant entrepreneurship are based on motivations and social status, they ignore dimensions of inequality such as access to mobility, space, and territory (Zapata-Barrero & Rezaei, 2020). For some entrepreneurs, like Luca Awad, spatial mobility is a desired yet restricted resource; for others, like Vanessa Cubillo, it is the possibility to settle in one place that constitutes a challenge. Therefore, access to im/mobilities are unequally distributed among our interviewees. TMEs who depend on spatial mobility experience a specific form of precariousness associated either with too much (possibly undesired) mobility or a lack of access to safe mobility.

Finally, our data also reveals differences regarding reliance on *institutional support*. TMEs in Colombia experience a relative lack of access to institutional training, consulting, sustainable financing, and networking compared to those in Spain and Switzerland. Yet the case of Luca Awad illustrates that government support can play an ambiguous role, even in wealthy countries: While social assistance enables him to sustain his livelihood in Switzerland, the associated constraints limit his entrepreneurial options, thus trapping him in long-term dependency on the state. This is a relevant observation for policymaking, as it shows the importance of acknowledging the transnational resources of migrants and creating the conditions under which they can fruitfully exploit them. In line with other feminist scholars, Parekh and Wilcox (2020) argue that 'vulnerability, dependency, and need should be understood not as deficits or limitations, but rather as essential human qualities requiring an adequate political response' (2020, p. 12). Our analysis highlights that such responses must consider individuals' motivations beyond economic interests, their interconnectedness with others, and the persistence of global social inequalities.

7. Conclusions

Social, cultural, and economic globalization shapes dependencies on many scales, including the micro-scale of everyday lives (Evans, 2001; Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). In this article, we analyzed these dependencies in the context of transnational migrant entrepreneurship. Inspired by the

literature on ‘globalization from below’ (Mathews et al., 2012) and feminist approaches (Parekh & Wilcox, 2020; Suralová, 2015; Webster & Haandrikman, 2017), we drew attention to the multiple relations involved in the daily activities of small-scale TMEs. Using empirical data from Spain, Switzerland, and Colombia, we highlighted the importance of social networks, geographical locations, spatial mobilities, and institutional support for migrants’ transnational business activities. Our twofold aim was to provide new insights into less visible globalization processes by studying small-scale TMEs and to show that they are not simply free economic agents but depend on connections in local and transnational spaces to develop their entrepreneurial projects. Interested to understand the interplay between different forms of dependencies and inequalities among TMEs, we addressed the following research question: Under which conditions is relying on others beneficial for TMEs, and under which conditions does it lead to precariousness?

In terms of our first aim, applying the lens of ‘globalization from below’ enabled us to include interviewees with diverse social and geographical backgrounds and to analyze the unequal entrepreneurial conditions they face. Revealing the diverse nature of dependencies—some productive, others unbalanced and contributing to precariousness—allowed us to nuance celebratory discourses about the positive impact of transnational connections. Moreover, focusing on diverse types of businesses in geographical contexts situated in both the Global North and the Global South added to the argument that the informal ‘back roads’ and formal ‘main roads’ of globalization intersect rather than oppose each other through the daily activities of TMEs (Knowles, 2014). Whether specific entrepreneurs are conceptualized as actors of globalization ‘from below’ or ‘from above’ may change over time depending on the opportunities and constraints they face, and the strategies they implement to navigate them.

In terms of our second aim, we discussed the fact that the development of small-scale transnational businesses is often analyzed in purely economic terms as a strategy to overcome difficulties accessing the labour market or achieving economic success. Our empirical data showed, however, that the aspirations of TMEs are not merely financially motivated, but also emerge for reasons of personal fulfilment, reconciling family and paid work, aiding home countries or communities, or resisting armed violence. A careful study of the complex interplay between multiple sources of disadvantage and opportunity led us to propose a typology that illustrates the extent to which TMEs can engage in reciprocal relations and dependencies to fulfil their aspirations.

Our typology highlights that dependencies are not constraining per se but can also lead to opportunity. Yet, the case of entrepreneurs who struggle with fragile dependencies (e.g. Luca Awad & Sandra Barroso) shows that a precarious social and geographical position makes certain dependencies unbalanced and potentially exploitative, thus complicating the mitigation of entrepreneurial risks. Therefore, starting a business in a poor and peripheral location, with fragile connections and a lack of alternatives, makes it difficult for TMEs to improve their situation and may trap them in exploitative relationships. However, the stories of entrepreneurs who develop alternatives despite difficult starting conditions show that some people (e.g. Alejandro Morales and Vanessa Cubillo) manage to counteract these fragilities by using supportive connections in a fruitful way to expand their options. In this sense, TMEs are not necessarily trapped in one type but may navigate multiple situations as new opportunities arise. We suggest that access to social networks, geographical locations, spatial mobilities, and institutional support may evolve over time, as does a sense of control over one’s life.

Understanding how diverse configurations of dependencies, fragilities, and alternatives emerge in the lives of TMEs contributes to research and policymaking by nuancing exaggeratedly positive views on entrepreneurship and casting light on the difficulties that many transnational migrants

face. Moreover, considering that TMEs are not only economically motivated, but also engage in entrepreneurial projects to fulfil personal dreams and aspirations, contributes to a more a holistic conceptualization of TMEs, which recognizes their need for emotional connection and social recognition (Saksela-Bergholm et al., 2019; Sandoz et al., 2022). Such a view is important, as it can give governments and institutions the tools to enable TMEs to maximize their resources and contribute economically, socially, and culturally to the multiple places to which they are connected (Webster, 2020).

Note

1. All names were changed to protect the anonymity of our interviewees.

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