8 Aspirations and Transnational Activities

8.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters dealt with patterns of functional and social incorporation in the receiving societies. However, irregular migrants also maintain ties to their country of origin. To understand how irregular migrants live in the receiving societies it is therefore important to take their transnational engagements into account. Transnationalism was defined by Basch, Schiller and Blanc (1994: 6) as 'the process by which transmigrants, through their daily activities, forge and sustain multi-stranded social, economic, and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national borders'.

From the outset of this emerging field of research, it was argued that transnationalism is not new. After all, migrants have always engaged in cross-border activities. So instead of a new phenomenon, transnationalism is regarded as representing a novel perspective (Portes 2003: 874). This new perspective is relevant to the study of migration because it offers a means to study 'an alternative adaptation path' (Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt 1999: 228). In other words, a transnational perspective is relevant because migrants’ cross-border activities are intertwined with the way they live in the receiving societies. This implies that the way irregular migrants live in receiving societies cannot be fully understood without taking their transnational engagements into account. This chapter therefore examines the transnational activities of irregular migrants.

At first, studies on transnationalism tended to include all kinds of cross-border activities, thereby exaggerating the scope of transnationalism. Researchers purposefully looked for transnational phenomena, selecting case studies in which these were abundant. In other words, many studies sampled on the dependent variable, for example, by conducting qualitative studies of organisations active in the transnational field (Portes 2001). This exaggeration of the significance of transnationalism led some authors to seek to delimit its scope (Portes et al. 1999).

Attempts to limit the scope of the perspective have resulted in a conceptualisation of transnationalism in terms of ‘regular and sustained cross-border activities of individuals’, making ‘freedom of movement the point of departure’, thereby implicitly excluding irregular migrants.
Irregular Migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands (Waldinger & Fitzgerald 2004: 1,178). Thus, studies of transnationalism seem to have overlooked irregular migration in their attempt to arrive at a clear conceptualisation. In the literature from transnational social fields (see, e.g., Levitt & Schiller 2004), irregular migrants are recognised as community participants, but their experiences are not systematically compared to the transnationalism of regular migrants, because the emphasis of such studies is on the level of the community as a whole. Consequently, questions are not asked about whether and how irregular migrants in particular experience and engage in transnationalism.

In spite of the lack of specific attention to irregular migrants, a dominant view can be derived from the literature on which one can base expectations about the transnational involvement of irregular migrants. Irregular migrants are not expected to be very active because of the obstacles they face. Portes (2001: 189), for example, finds that ‘immigrants’ transnationalism is associated with a more secure economic and legal status in the host country’. Likewise, Mazzucato (2008: 213) claims that as irregular migrants face difficulties in their incorporation, these also ‘hamper migrants’ possibilities of investing in their home country’. Hence, because irregular migrants are less able to create a stable position for themselves in the destination country, they are considered less equipped to engage in transnational activities. In addition, Bloch (2008: 298) finds that migrants who had legal access to the labour market were ‘more than six times’ more likely to send economic remittances than other migrants. According to this author, ‘structural exclusions based on immigration status’ adversely affect transnational capabilities (ibid.: 302).

These authors consistently associate transnational activities with higher human capital resources, such as education, immigration experience, occupational status and legal status (Bloch 2008; Mazzucato 2008; Portes 2003: 886; Waldinger 2008). Portes (2003: 887) shows ‘unambiguously that the migrants most involved in cross border initiatives are not the most exploited or marginalised’. Following this line of reasoning, it is likely that irregular migrants do not engage much in transnational activities.

As the literature on transnationalism has so far mostly provided tentative indications of the activities irregular migrants undertake, one would expect the literature on irregular migration to supply better answers. However, studies of irregular migrants devote little attention to the transnational activities their research subjects engage in. It has been mentioned that irregular migrants have a transnational outlook and are oriented towards their country of origin (Chavez 1998, Mahler 1995, Piore 1979), but remittances are the only cross-border activities to which attention is commonly devoted. Neglecting the broader scope of the literature on transnationalism, studies
of irregular migrants have not extended their view to include social and political transnational activities as well. Furthermore, the focus of research on irregular migrants’ transnational activities is on their transnational economic obligations and the limitations these pose for their incorporation into the destination country and their chances of achieving upward social mobility (Mahler 1995: 6-7). Following the ‘survival perspective’ (see chapter 2), researchers probably assume that irregular migrants are unable to engage in transnational activities: they only have transnational obligations which they struggle to fulfil.

All in all, studies on irregular migrants focus on incorporation within the receiving societies and neglect their transnational engagements. Those that do pay attention to transnationalism only take economic obligations into account, analysing how these affect outcomes in terms of mobility. This narrow focus is unfortunate, because we have learned from studies of regular migrants that there is much to gain from adopting a broader transnational perspective. This chapter therefore attempts to contribute to the scholarly debate on transnationalism, as well as to the literature on irregular migrants, by bringing a transnational perspective to the study of irregular migration.

Now that it is clear that transnationalism should be studied among irregular migrants, the question is how to do it. It is not always clear what exactly we mean by ‘a transnational perspective’ (Levitt, De Wind & Vertovec 2003), yet there is plenty of empirical research that calls itself transnational (Smith 2006). Although transnational migration studies form an emerging field that is still very fragmented, a distinction is generally made between economic, social and political activities (see, e.g., Portes et al. 1999; Snel, Engbersen & Leerkes 2006; Bloch 2008). I therefore analyse the transnational activities of my respondents under these same headings.

Because of the nature of my study I focus on transnationalism of individual migrants and not of groups. Although researchers do distinguish between transnational activities and transnational identifications (Snel et al. 2006), my focus is only on the activities. This choice stems from practical considerations: the semi-structured interviews did not contain questions pertaining to transnational identifications but only to economic, social and political activities.

8.2 Economic transnational activities

Investment migrants have come to the destination country to earn money that they want to invest in their home country. They therefore usually remit
large shares of their incomes. In practice, the sums of money they send home roughly amount to € 2,000 to € 5,000 per year. Investment migrants differ in the frequency with which they send their remittances. Some send small sums of money each month, while others save larger amounts that they send every few months. Mehmet, from Turkey, makes sure he sends money each month: ‘I have a house in Karaman. [My wife] lives there with my three sons and two daughters. I take care of them financially ... [I send] around € 350 each month.’ However, some investment migrants do not remit at all. Although they save a large share of their income, they choose to safeguard the money themselves instead of sending it to their home country. The migrants who save instead of remit are often without a partner and children. They save for their own business projects or in order to finance a future wedding. Whether investment migrants send money to the country of origin or save it, in the end all of the money is intended for investment there. That means either way, investment migrants are very much engaged in economic transnational activities.

Settlement migrants normally prioritise their own financial situation and remit a much smaller share of their income than investment migrants do. They want to build a life in the destination country, and they need money to do so. Moreover, because settlement migrants have usually brought their immediate family over, they are not usually financially responsible for relatives back home. They have only their parents or extended family in the origin country, and no financial responsibilities for them, though they may support them occasionally or in case of special needs (see Bouras 2012 for similar observations). When I asked Isidora, from Ecuador, if she sends money home, she responded:

A little. They [my parents] are old so I send a little bit of money. And my father is ill so I send a little money for that ... It is impossible to send more money because I have four children who make expenses. And we have to pay the rent, and now that the children are studying they need Internet so I have to pay the rent and the Internet, the electricity, so the costs are high.

Isidora clearly did not work to support family in Ecuador, but to support her family life in Belgium. This does not mean that she did not remit at all, but she remitted a much smaller share of her income than investment migrants would do.

Although some do not remit at all, most settlement migrants send small sums of money on an irregular basis, usually in case of special needs that
come up in the country of origin. The amounts they send are normally under € 1,000 per year. A few of my respondents with settlement aspirations did have financial obligations in their country of origin that demanded they remit much larger sums. These settlement migrants were normally on their own in the destination country and worked to provide for their family in the origin country. In fact, they were settlement migrants, because they were able to support their families through their stay in the destination country. Recall Arda, from Turkey, who was quoted in chapter 5 saying: ‘I don’t have any choice. I stay here to send money to my family. I can work all year round here, in Turkey I only work a few months a year.’ These are the migrants who have settled down in Belgium or the Netherlands so that they can provide for their family back home. They remit a smaller share of their income than investment migrants do because the length of their stay does not allow a spartan lifestyle to be endured. Nevertheless, they remit a lot more than the other settlement migrants do: between € 2,000 and € 4,000 annually.

In contrast, legalisation migrants hardly send any money to their countries of origin. Because they do not work much they have little money to remit. Efunsegun, for example, responded with surprise to my question of whether he sends money to Nigeria: ‘No! I am not working, what money do I have to send?’ Likewise, Fasila, a Congolese woman, responded, ‘[T]his is not possible now because I do not have any income.’ Although their relatives in the origin country may have a strong need for additional income, legalisation migrants feel that they have to get their legalisation in order before they are capable of helping their family. René, also from Congo, said, ‘Actually I am responsible for my family but I do not have the financial means to support them.’ Legalisation migrants worry about their own needs first. Alexandre, from Congo, said, ‘Money, I don’t have any money. It costs € 1,200 to bring [my son] here nowadays. But even if someone would give me € 1,000 now, I choose to pay the rent two months ahead you know.’ The incomes of legalisation migrants are too low in relation to their costs to allow them to send surplus income to the country of origin.

However, the fact that they do not work and consequently have little money to send home is not the only reason why legalisation migrants normally do not remit. Legalisation migrants usually do not have financial responsibility for people in the home country. Mehdi, for example, said, ‘No [I don’t remit] because there aren’t any family members that I am financially responsible for, neither here nor in Morocco.’ Likewise, Kiril said, ‘The only family I have left in Bulgaria is my mother, and she lives from her old age pension. I don’t send any money to Bulgaria, I just take care of my family here.’ Rakesh, from India, responded, ‘[Money] is no problem. I have good land,
crops and everything, with a big house, no problem.' Since the migration of legalisation migrants had not been economically inspired, they did not have the financial obligations that investment migrants or settlement migrants had. Their migration was often the result of political conflict. In other cases, it involved young men who were unemployed in their home country and migrated to find a better future for themselves, not because family incomes needed to be supplemented. They were busy trying to find someone to marry and devoted their limited resources towards achieving this aim.

In a few cases, money even flows in the opposite direction. Some legalisation migrants come from rich families and therefore do not send money to the country of origin; instead their family members there send money to them. This financial support enables them to pay their expenses, while they wait for the outcomes of their procedures. However, as procedures may take a very long time and Belgium and the Netherlands are expensive countries to live in, their families cannot supply financial aid for long.

Before my family used to send money to me. But in my country [Syria], look things are really expensive here, €1,000 is nothing here, €1,000 is the rent for less than three months but in my country €1,000 is a lot of money. Way too much you understand that is why [they can’t continue to send money] (Rasja, Syria).

A few of my respondents had occasionally been supported by their families back home and thus had experienced a small and temporary inverted financial flow. Others indicated that although they could ask family for financial support, they were too ashamed to do so.

All in all, the extent to which irregular migrants engage in economic transnational activities and the way they do it depends in part on their aspirations. Whereas investment migrants save much of their income to either remit or for their own use later, settlement migrants usually send smaller sums of money home, except for those whose partner and children still live in the home country. Of all three categories, legalisation migrants remit the least. In the next section, we will see how aspirations are related to irregular migrants’ social transnational activities.

### 8.3 Social transnational activities

Investment migrants are socially oriented towards their country of origin. Feeling that their lives take place there instead of in the destination country,
they invest time and energy in maintaining social relations with their relatives and friends back home. When asked how often they contact family or friends in their country of origin, investment migrants responded with answers like, ‘I call and send my wife text messages every day’ (Cahil, Turkey) or ‘[I call my family] every weekend and normally I call friends as well’ (Sofia, Bolivia). Most investment migrants call their friends and family members at least a few times each week and keep a minimum frequency of once a week.

Because investment migrants do not have an active social life in the destination country and because they cannot take part in social life back home, many investment migrants mention how much they miss their friends and families. Tümer, from Turkey, said, ‘I don’t have any difficulties, I just miss my family. As soon as I have enough money saved I’ll go back.’ And Asen (Bulgaria) said, ‘I miss my wife and children very much. Last month my granddaughter was born and I haven’t been able to see her yet. As soon as my savings are in order I’ll go back.’ The contacts they have with their spouse, children and other loved ones make them want to go home even faster, and this inspires them to work harder towards that goal.

In contrast, ‘home’ for settlement migrants is the destination country. They call their relatives a lot less than investment migrants do: only once or twice a month. Antonia, from Ecuador, said she calls her parents less often now that she has settled down and brought her children over and now that her sisters all reside in Belgium as well: ‘Before I always called my mother and father every week but now I don’t do that anymore.’ Settlement migrants want to build a future in the destination country. They therefore do not feel the need to be in touch with the home country as often as investment migrants do.

While most settlement migrants contact their family and friends at least once a month, a few respondents with settlement aspirations do not have any contact with the home country at all. Over the course of their stay in Belgium or the Netherlands, they break all ties to family and friends in the country of origin. Adil, from Morocco, was one of these:

I haven’t called in almost four years. Four years yes. I didn’t feel like it. If you don’t have money or work, no future. And if I call now my family will say ‘Why haven’t you called?’ Normally I called every week or every month but now I haven’t called in almost four years.

Adil had not contacted his relatives because he was ashamed to say that he does not have work and that he lives in the streets.
Whereas some settlement migrants lose contact with their relatives back home over the course of their stay, legalisation migrants sometimes do not have transnational social contacts from the outset. Many legalisation migrants left their country of origin to seek security from political persecution or war. Keeping in touch with friends and family in countries that have been severely disrupted by war can be a difficult thing.

I do not have contact with anyone. Seven years. I do still have a brother but I don’t know where he is. I don’t know if he is alive or not. I don’t have any idea. I try to build a life here now for myself, we forget about the past (Dnari, Sierra Leone).

Likewise, Kalusha, from Congo, said, ‘I don’t know where my family is staying. I am trying to get contact with friends who have helped me but it is not working.’ The difficulties some legalisation migrants experience in contacting friends and family help to explain why many legalisation migrants do not remit.

Even if they do know how to locate their family members, some legalisation migrants are afraid that contacting their relatives might bring them into danger, as was expressed by Lazzat:

It is very dangerous [to call relatives in Uzbekistan]. If they would know that I am here then they might get problems and not me, and I don’t want that you know ... I have three sisters ... I have contact with one now because she lives in Russia ... Russia is safe, she works in Moscow.

Clearly, for some legalisation migrants, the political situation in their country of origin complicates the maintenance of social contacts.

Whereas it can be practically impossible for some legalisation migrants to keep in touch, those who can reach people in the origin country often face other barriers to maintaining transnational social contacts. These barriers are connected to their aspirations. Relatives back home do not understand the hardships irregular migrants go through in their efforts to become legalised.

Yeah I call my mother sometimes so that she doesn’t worry. I would like to have contact more often but then they say, ‘Oh, you don’t have papers yet, you are not trying hard enough, or what are you doing there.’ It is difficult to talk and to explain the situation (Tarek, Algeria).
Families have sometimes invested money in the migration plans of their relatives and do not want to see these fail. Furthermore, they may not know about the requirement of papers, or be unable to accurately assess the chances a migrant has of becoming legalised. Family members wonder why they do not receive remittances. When legalisation migrants try to explain that it is not so easy in Europe they are sometimes accused of lying because migrants before them have been successful. These misunderstandings can lead to arguments, as Tarek explained. Even if family members do understand, the stakes are so high they encourage legalisation migrants to keep on trying.

I call them sometimes, maybe once or twice in a month. Sometimes they call me, but normally I call them. I always tell them about my feelings in Europe ... [T]hey encourage me, they say that I am the eldest son of the family, that I have to continue struggling, and one of these days God will see me through (Enfunsegun, Nigeria).

Instead of providing emotional support, the telephone calls home increase stress, leading these migrants to call home less than they would like. In addition, these contacts strengthen their aspiration to become legalised.

Next to the social contacts migrants maintain with the country of origin, another issue that is frequently brought up in connection with social transnational activities is the extent to which migrants keep up to date on things that happen in their home country. Therefore, respondents were asked if they watch television, read newspapers, surf the Internet or have other ways of following what happens in their home country. Investment migrants indicated having little time to follow the news or to read newspapers. Moreover, they were unwilling to invest in expensive satellite television equipment. After all, they were only in the destination country on a temporary basis, and such subscriptions cost a lot of money. When they are unemployed they watch television or read newspapers in teahouses where they wait for a new job. Thus, while investment migrants do very much want to keep up with the latest developments in their home country, they mostly do so only through conversations with friends and relatives over the phone, as they find other means too expensive.

While investment migrants are keen to keep up with the situation in their country of origin, settlement migrants care a lot less. Lucas, for example, said, 'No we don’t have news from Chile. Despite the fact that there is news on the Internet and in newspapers, I don’t do it a lot.’ Lucas found it too much trouble to go to an Internet cafe in another neighbourhood, which
indicates that he did not feel an urge to be updated on the latest news from his origin country. While settlement migrants are interested in the lives of their relatives and friends and developments in the local communities where these live, they do not make much effort to follow the latest news concerning their country of origin in general. Instead, they look for a sense of home in the destination country by taking part in activities organised by socio-cultural organisations and other social gatherings.

In contrast to settlement migrants, legalisation migrants are usually keen to keep up with the latest developments.

Ever since I fled I follow what happens in Uzbekistan every day, and the situation keeps getting worse and worse ... [I follow it] through the Internet. Everything via the Internet. On television here in Europe you see little, practically nothing (Lazzat).

Legalisation migrants have little money, because they do not work much, but they often do have satellite television and they find ways to surf the Internet. Rasja, from Syria, was several months overdue on the rent and about to be evicted by her landlord. Yet she proudly said to me, ‘Yes of course, we have satellite television, we watch Al Jazeera.’ This urge to keep up to date is obviously related to the fact that they fled their country when it was in a bad situation, and they want to know if things there are improving. After all, they have relatives and friends there whose lives might be in danger. Furthermore, while they seek legalisation in the destination country because of the bad situation in their country of origin, some hope they might be able to return one day if the situation improves there. Kalusha, for example, said, ‘[A]s soon as there is peace again in Congo I want to go back. My family is there and I want to be with them and I lived well there.’

Apart from social contacts and the extent to which migrants keep up to date on developments in their country of origin, research normally considers visits to the country of origin an indicator of social transnational activities (Smith 2006). Obviously, visiting the home country involves crossing national borders, and this is complicated for many irregular migrants. However, investment migrants do not pay visits to their home countries. Mehmet, from Turkey, example, answered the question of whether he visits his country of origin with, ‘No because I will only go back once I have earned enough money.’ Illian, from Bulgaria, answered similarly: ‘No because I haven’t saved enough money yet.’ They want to work and make money, then go back for good, preferably not to leave again.
In contrast, most settlement migrants enjoy visiting their home countries, and they do this if they are able. They visit family and go back to attend important family events, such as weddings. For Eastern Europeans it is relatively easy to travel back and forth since border authorities do not usually stamp passports, and the costs of travel are relatively low. For those whose journey involves flying it is generally more difficult and more expensive to visit family. Those who do not have visa restrictions have to buy a new stamp-free passport during their visit. Due to the high costs attached to flying and buying a new passport, only few of my respondents had done so. However, this does not mean that they had not seen their family and friends since they left their country of origin. The lack of visa restrictions makes it possible for their friends and family to come to Belgium or the Netherlands. A few of my respondents with settlement aspirations told me that their relatives had come to the destination country on a holiday to pay them a visit.

Settlement migrants who do face visa restrictions have to buy false papers or find and pay smugglers that can take them across the borders. This is a cost and a risk that none of my respondents had been willing to take. Although settlement migrants sometimes want to visit their home country, they face too many obstacles to do so in practice. For some of them, their urge to see family and friends becomes so great that it develops into a reason to shift to legalisation aspirations after a while. After all, only through legalisation can they possibly visit their family and then return to Belgium or the Netherlands.

Although most settlement migrants would like to visit their home country, there were a few among my respondents who did not feel any urge to go there. But their reasons for not wanting to visit the home country were very different from those given by investment migrants. Tellingly, settlement migrant Mustafa (Bulgaria) answered my question of whether he visits his home country very differently from the investment migrants quoted earlier: ‘No because I live in Belgium now. I have nothing to go back to except for my father.’ While investment migrants stress they only want to return once they have earned enough money, Mustafa focuses on his choice for settlement in Belgium in explaining why he does not want to visit his home country.

In contrast to settlement migrants, who sometimes did visit their country of origin, none of my respondents with legalisation aspirations had paid their country of origin a visit. After all, not only do they face the same barriers to travel as the other irregular migrants, their desire to become legalised is often connected to a fear of going back for safety reasons. Those from safer countries are afraid that temporarily leaving the country in which they have an application being processed might damage the outcome of the application.
All in all, it is clear that aspirations play a role in shaping different kinds of social transnational activities. The frame of reference of investment migrants is their home country, which is why they call, send text messages and use the Internet to communicate with their loved ones on an almost daily basis. For settlement migrants, ‘home’ is the destination country, which is why their social lives are focused there. They maintain personal contacts within the country of origin, but do not normally follow the latest news. Legalisation migrants do follow the news, but do not manage (or only moderately manage) to maintain social contacts within their country of origin. Not only are personal contacts within the country of origin often complicated by political conditions, contacts may be frustrated because people back home do not understand the struggles they go through in their attempts to become legalised. Settlement migrants are the only irregular migrants that occasionally visit the country of origin, if obstacles are not too high.

8.4 Political transnational activities

None of my respondents with investment aspirations was engaged in political transnational activities. They indicated that they did not take part in demonstrations concerning their home country and they did not participate in politically inspired activities. Sometimes they even admitted that they did not follow what was going on in politics in their home country at all. Diego, from Chile, said, ‘Look, if I am honest, I am outside of all, of politics.’ Diego is here to work, and he does not want to spend his time on things other than work if they do not bring the attainment of his aspirations any closer. Furthermore, as indicated in chapter 5, investment migrants usually come from countries where there is some investment potential. These are normally not countries afflicted by war or political strife. Irregular migrants may therefore feel little need to have up to date knowledge on the political situation.

Settlement migrants are also not very politically active either. When I talked about their political engagement with Fernanda and Camilla, both from Ecuador, Fernanda said, ‘[W]hen my brothers call me they inform me but not like, I ask very little about politics personally.’ Camilla said, ‘I don’t even know who the president of Ecuador is, I don’t know.’ These two migrants are focused on their lives in Belgium. They do care about their family and friends back home, but not about the political situation in their country. This lack of political interest is reflected in the activities settlement
migrants organise. These focus on transferring cultural heritage to their children and on increasing social solidarity in the destination country rather than on discussing the political situation of the home country. Although political issues may come up in private conversations, settlement migrants generally do not participate in political activities concerning their country of origin.

In contrast to investment and settlement migrants, legalisation migrants are more frequently engaged in political transnational activities. Maboula, from Congo, did engage in political activities concerning his country of origin: ‘Yes, when people ask me to demonstrate in the streets against certain things that concern my country yes I do that.’ Likewise, Kyiaki, also from Congo, said, ‘Yes I am very active, I participate in every demonstration.’ Similarly, Lazzat (Uzbekistan) described his political engagement:

> Ever since I came here I have been very active with the Uyghur people, I have been very active for the future of the Uyghurs. We want our country to be independent, we want our country back ... We do political activities like, for example, each year we do a demonstration at the Chinese embassy in remembrance of the uprising that took place in a Uyghur city in 1997.

Some legalisation migrants even indicated that they are (still) members of political parties in their country of origin.

In fact, many legalisation migrants have specific aspirations to become legalised because of the political problems in their country of origin. Bloch (2008: 301) similarly notes that participation in political activities by his respondents (both regular and irregular migrants) was ‘related to the main motivation for migration: those who left Zimbabwe for political reasons were most likely to engage in diasporic political activities’ (Bloch 2008: 301). Political issues in their country of origin often formed the reason for their flight, and more importantly, they make legalisation migrants afraid to go back. As they believe they cannot go back, they aspire to start a new life elsewhere and hence aspire to legalisation. They want to become legalised because they feel they have no other place to go. Lazzat said he engaged in political transnational activities because he felt he no longer had a home country. He was refused by both Uzbekistan and Belgium. He felt landless and wanted to try his chances not only in Belgium, but also in his native Uyghur land:

> I don’t have anything to do with politics but to live like this and not be welcome anywhere, I am fed up with this. I just fight my own battle for
independence of our own country. Even though there is little chance that we will get it there is hope. Maybe it will work. Maybe such a large country will fall apart like the Soviet regime has. Maybe this will happen in China as well. And then we can have our own country, and Tibet as well. Then we will go back and build our country.

Migrant organisations usually coordinate the political activities that legalisation migrants engage in. These organisations not only devote attention to improving the political situation in the origin country, but they also look out for the well-being of those who live in the destination country. Albert, from Congo, explained the twofold mission of the organisation he belonged to:

Here in Belgium I am a member of ... there are Congolese who have started an organisation like [name of NGO] which is called the Congolese liga. It is like [names of two organisations] and I am a member there. They do manifestations, organise debates, they invite people to talk, like, for example, about the way people without papers live here in Belgium, and for example, we have invited someone who comes to talk about Congo, about the time of Mubutu, the time of Kabila.

While settlement migrants create and become members of organisations that focus on social solidarity and culture, legalisation migrants seek out organisations active in the political arena. These organisations might focus on political transnational activities concerning the country of origin, or they might address problems faced by the migrants in question in the destination country. Some of these organisations, for example, try to improve the situation of irregular migrants, and they inform all migrants about their rights and obligations.

Mascini, Fermin and Snick (2009) indicate that transnationalism is by no means self-evident among migrants who have sought to escape conflict. Likewise, I found that whereas many legalisation migrants who were involved in procedures were engaged in political transnational activities, there were also some who choose not to be. They had often completely closed the door to ever returning to their country of origin; or the problems in their origin countries were not considered that urgent (anymore). They found their own day-to-day problems too big of a worry to exert themselves for yet another cause. As Tarek, from Algeria, said, ‘I like politics but I have never been a member of a political party ... [Y]ou know, you can’t be a member of an organisation if you have a problem that is more important than that.’
It has been suggested that irregular migrants’ membership and participation in political activities of organisations are instrumentally motivated (Pasura 2008). By bringing the problems in their home country to the forefront, they hope to increase their chances of legalisation. Their instrumental motivation is also indicated by the finding that irregular migrants participate actively, but once they become legalised they usually cease all these activities. Although my findings also point in this direction, they are not conclusive. This suggestion of an instrumental motivation for political transnational activities does help us to understand why legalisation migrants involved in procedures tend to engage in political transnational activities and why legalisation migrants who aim to get married usually do not.

8.5 Shifts in aspirations

The above demonstrates that the transnational activities of irregular migrants can be understood from their aspirations. Obviously, the results presented here represent a simplified ideal-type picture, and they do not do justice to all empirical diversity. Furthermore, as the aspirations of irregular migrants may change over time respondents sometimes found themselves in between ideal types. It is important here to understand that if irregular migrants’ aspirations change, their transnational activities are likely to change with them.

Antonia, from Ecuador, is a good example. She explained how her remittance behaviour changed once she brought her two sons over and decided to settle down:

Before I sent a lot, [I sent] all I had. I was very generous. But right now I don’t do that anymore ... before I sent money to keep it there but now I think it is better to keep it here. Because always if something happened I had to say give me this ... I think it is better to keep the little money I have saved here and not in Ecuador.

Antonia indicated that she wanted to be in control of her own money. She needs to be able to take care of any sudden needs that arise for her or her family in Belgium. She sends a little money to her parents, and she lets her brothers keep the rent that she gets for her house in Ecuador. When she had investment aspirations she remitted all that she could. But her aspirations changed and now she keeps her savings for herself and her future. That migrants are inclined to remit less if their aspirations shift and they decide
to settle down has been noted by other authors as well. Massey et al. (1987: 207) observe that ‘a sure sign that a settlement process in under way occurs when migrants send fewer earnings back home and spend more in the United States’.

If aspirations change the social transnational activities irregular migrants engage in change as well. Recall Antonia, who not only remitted less after she decided to settle down, but who also said she no longer called her parents every week. The same applies to political activities. Lazzat, from Uzbekistan, said that he was contemplating whether to file another asylum or regularisation case or whether he should start to look for a job and forget about his political engagements.

### 8.6 Aspirations and transnational activities

This chapter examined the types of transnationalism irregular migrants engage in and the extent to which they are active, which can be understood in relation to the aspirations they have. Table 8.1 characterises the types of transnational activities engaged in by irregular migrants with different types of aspirations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transnational activities</th>
<th>Investment</th>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>Legalisation</th>
<th>Legalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>Very active</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>Little to none</td>
<td>Little to none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Many personal contacts</td>
<td>Some personal contacts and receiving society</td>
<td>High involvement, TV, papers, internet</td>
<td>Personal contacts and receiving society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>No activities</td>
<td>No activities</td>
<td>Some activities</td>
<td>No activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Investment migrants are very engaged in economic transnational activities, whereas settlement migrants spend the greatest share of their incomes in the destination country and send fewer remittances home. The frame of reference of investment migrants is in the home country, which is why they call, send text messages and use the Internet to communicate with their loved ones on an almost daily basis. They keep up with what happens in the country of origin through these contacts. Set-
tlement migrants, in contrast, focus on their social lives in the destination country. They might maintain personal contacts within the country of origin, but they do not normally follow the latest national news from there. Legalisation migrants appear to be the only category that engages in political transnational activities. Although not all legalisation migrants engage in political activities, for those who do this seems to be closely connected to their aspirations.

The literature on immigrant transnationalism notes that transnational activities are not common. Portes (2003: 877), for example, writes that ‘subsequent research has indicated that regular involvement in transnational activities characterises only a minority of immigrants and that even occasional involvement is not a universal practice’. Waldinger (2008: 24) finds that ‘transnationalism is a rare condition of being and transmigrants are an uncommon class of persons’. Furthermore, as indicated in this chapter’s introduction, irregular migrants are expected to engage in transnational activities least of all because of the obstacles they face (see Portes, Escobar & Radford 2007). Portes (2001: 189) finds that ‘immigrant transnationalism is associated with a more secure economic and legal status in the host country’. Likewise, Bloch (2008: 302) claims that ‘structural exclusions based on immigration status’ adversely affect transnational capabilities. However, many of my respondents engaged quite frequently in transnational activities. In addition, despite the limitations they faced, many of my respondents managed to find ways to engage in those types of activities that were important to them. In fact, investment migrants prioritise their economic transnational engagements over their own well-being in the destination country. Hence, the aspirations irregular migrants have underlie the transnational activities they undertake.

Furthermore, in those cases where my respondents were not transnationally active, it was not necessarily because of the limitations they experienced. Rather, it sometimes stemmed from choice. This flies in the face of the assumption implicit in much research that as migrants earn more they will engage more in transnational activities (see, e.g., Bloch 2008). Settlement migrants do not necessarily remit more when they earn more. Instead, they tend to choose to spend their extra earnings on their own family in the destination country. For legalisation migrants, increasing income is not likely to lead them to remit more, but actually to work less. Only investment migrants increase their economic transnational activities when they earn more.

Whereas there may seem to be a logical relationship between migrants, economic positions and their propensity to engage in economic transna-
tional activities, this is less obvious for social and political transnationalism. Whereas it does cost money to make telephone calls and to participate in political activity, my respondents hardly mentioned money as a reason for their lack of or infrequent activity. Furthermore, while an investment migrant from Turkey called home more often than an investment migrant from Chile – because of the costs involved – the latter made calls more frequently than his co-nationals with settlement aspirations. Whereas factors such as cost may somewhat affect the frequency of specific activities, their influence is by far overshadowed by the impact of aspirations in shaping transnational activities.

Many scholars have sought to learn whether the general relationship between incorporation and transnationalism is a positive or negative one. Some find that incorporation weakens transnational participation, while others find that it does not (Itzigsohn & Giorguli-Saucedo 2002). It is a huge step forward to recognise that in order to make statements about this relationship, a differentiation needs to be made among economic, social and political activities, as the relationship works differently for distinct types of activities (Snel et al. 2006). Yet while researchers worry about the relationship between incorporation and transnationalism, they overlook the fact that both are rooted in aspirations. Distinguishing between different types of transnational activity has advanced research, but studies also need to contextualise on the side of agency of the migrants to properly understand why migrants do or do not engage in certain types of transnational activities (see Al-Ali 2002). Future research on transnationalism can therefore significantly benefit from taking aspirations into account as well.