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THE IMPACT OF CANADIAN LABOUR
EXPERIENCE ON THE HOUSEHOLDS
OF MEXICANS: A SEMINAL VIEW ON
BEST PRACTICES

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SUMMARY

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP), which allows Mexico to send migrant farm workers to Canada since 1974, has been touted as a model guest worker program complete with best practices.

After bringing into focus the key elements of the program, including the primary results of a survey of a cross-section of Mexicans employed on Canadian farms, this paper will highlight the program's positive impact on the workers' families, especially with respect to living standards and their children's education, and will show that the intervention of both governments — Canadian and Mexican — as guarantors in the relationship between employers and employees is an important contributing factor to the program's success.

The SAWP is designed to address a specific problem in the Canadian farming sector where harvesters of perishable produce, especially in summer, are in short supply. Participants in the program, namely poor Mexican peasants or day labourers, are authorized to work in Canada where they enjoy a totally different quality of life. Given the legality of the labour flows, this program eliminates the need for smugglers and also reduces travelling and housing costs for these migrant farm workers.

It is useful to bear these points in mind, particularly now that the Canadian government has started initiating similar labour agreements, such as the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP), where there is less government oversight.

SOMMAIRE

Le Programme des travailleurs agricoles saisonniers (PTAS), qui permet au Mexique d'envoyer des travailleurs agricoles migrants au Canada depuis 1974, a été salué comme un programme modèle de travailleurs invités en raison de ses pratiques exemplaires sous-jacentes.

Après avoir dégagé les éléments clés du programme, de même que les résultats primaires d'un sondage auprès d'un échantillon représentatif des Mexicains ayant travaillé dans des fermes au Canada, cette étude mettra en évidence les effets positifs du programme sur la famille des travailleurs, notamment en ce qui a trait au niveau de vie et à la scolarisation de leurs enfants. Parallèlement, l'étude montrera comment la participation des gouvernements du Canada et du Mexique a beaucoup contribué au franc succès du programme. Le PTAS est conçu pour régler un problème bien défini dans le secteur agricole canadien, celui du manque, surtout en été, de moissonneurs de produits agricoles périssables. Les participants au programme, soit des paysans mexicains démunis ou des manœuvres agricoles journaliers, sont autorisés à travailler au Canada où ils jouissent d'une qualité de vie tout autre. De plus, la situation de légalité garantie par le programme élimine le recours à des passeurs clandestins et réduit aussi les frais de voyage et de logement encourus par les travailleurs agricoles migrants.

Il serait très utile de ne pas perdre de vue ces acquis, surtout à l'heure où le gouvernement du Canada met en œuvre des ententes de travail similaires qui, à l'exemple du Programme concernant les travailleurs étrangers temporaires (PTET), n'exigent du gouvernements qu'une participation limitée.

RESUMEN

El Programa de trabajadores agrícolas temporales (PTAT) ha sido señalado como un ejemplo de buenas prácticas en lo que se refiere a programas de trabajadores huéspedes. México ha estado enviando trabajadores estacionales a Canadá desde 1974.

En el trabajo se ofrece una visión resumida sobre las características del PTAT, así como algunos de los resultados principales de una encuesta aplicada a una muestra de trabajadores mexicanos que han estado trabajando en las granjas canadienses. Se destacan los impactos positivos del programa en la situación de bienestar de los hogares de los trabajadores, principalmente en sus condiciones de vivienda y en la educación de sus hijos.

Se reitera la importancia que ha tenido la presencia de los dos gobiernos como actores neutrales ya que ha sido fundamental para el éxito del mismo.

El programa procuró complementar una demanda laboral específica con una oferta también específica ya que en Canadá hacían falta brazos para la recolección de productos perecederos, sobre todo en los meses de verano. Quienes han participado en el programa, han sido campesinos precarios o jornaleros asalariados quienes trabajan el campo con sus propias manos en México.

Los trabajadores han gozado de una situación de legalidad en Canadá, cambiándoles con ello rotundamente su calidad de vida mientras permanecen en el país huésped. Además, se suprime la necesidad del uso de “polleros” y a los trabajadores les resulta más barato el viaje y sus gastos de estancia por la condición de legalidad.

Sería muy útil no dejar de recordar estas experiencias, sobre todo ahora que el gobierno canadiense ha empezado a practicar otros esquemas laborales donde se ha reducido la presencia de los gobiernos en la marcha de programas laborales, como el Programa de Trabajadores Temporales Extranjeros.

Introduction*

The Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (SAWP) is considered an example of best practices in the design of guest worker programs. With 32 years and counting,¹ this program is, by its very longevity, a testament to its own success. In fact, it is difficult to find another program in the world with similar characteristics and satisfaction levels among the main stakeholders, namely the Mexican workers and their Canadian employers. As a binational program, the SAWP puts in play various government agencies, primarily the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and the Departments of Labour.

Unlike other seasonal worker programs, such as those implemented in Europe, the SAWP has not led to a wave of permanent immigration. In fact, the statement that “there are no foreign workers more permanent than those who follow a temporary worker program,” made by a U.S. government advisor, does not apply at all in this case. Why? Because the program acts in part as a mediator in a relationship where, as business practices dictate, the parties seek to maximize monetary rewards.

Yet, the overall history of employer-employee relations is often filled with conflict. Progress in this regard has only occurred through statutory and conflict resolution provisions, most notably in countries with strong democratic institutions and civil societies.

The relationship between capital and labour does not occur naturally but instead requires the periodic intervention of authorities neutral to the interests of the parties involved. This

requirement becomes even more significant since the program’s participants are foreign workers who, being alien in the host country, face a greater likelihood of increased exploitation and abuse.

This point will be reviewed later once program-related data is presented and impacts on the workers’ families discussed.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to summarize the characteristics of the SAWP as well as some primary results of a survey involving Mexican farm labourers in Canada. Based on this summary, this report presents some reflections regarding the program’s impact on the families of these workers, along with proposals for further research beyond this exercise.

With huge north-bound migratory flows, or what seems like a wave of unskilled migrant workers, concern has surfaced in many circles (i.e., government, think tanks and academia) regarding the extent to which remittances foster true economic development or whether they have merely become a source of much needed foreign exchange for the native countries. Moreover, as current migratory flows continue to attract younger generations, this north-bound flow may be unstoppable in the future.

This concern, however legitimate, should be nuanced in that international migratory flows — particularly labour flows — respond not only to very complex conditions, but also more specifically to market forces. The available labour supply can only be fully understood in relation to the existing demand for it in the countries of destination. In this sense, Mexico is a perfect illustration.

Every year for over a decade, thousands of Central Americans arrive in Mexico with dreams of reaching the United States. But how many end

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* FOCAL and Gustavo Verduzco thank The North-South Institute for permission to use material in this document which draws on a report prepared for NSI as part of the project, Canada’s Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program as a Model of ‘Best Practices’ in the Employment of Caribbean and Mexican Farm Workers. For details of that project’s findings and other reports, please visit: <http://www.nsi-ins.ca/english/research/archive/2004/05.asp>.

up staying in Mexico? The answer is very few. Including even the undocumented, and despite the fact that many would undoubtedly adapt much better in a country similar in language and culture, Central Americans form a small group in Mexico. This is because the labour conditions that would enable them to settle there do not exist. In other words, there is no viable demand for the labour supply that passes through Mexico. This is why the issue of migration — complex though it may be — leads inevitably to a broader question, namely identifying the conditions for development and the means to achieve it.

Research on the SAWP²

Early in 2003, a cross-section of Mexican labourers working seasonally on Canadian farms was surveyed (Verduzco and Lozano, 2003). The sample of 380 cases obtained from the Labour and Social Security Secretariat (STPS) database in Mexico City — the equivalent to Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) — was randomly selected from a file with information on approximately 24,000 Mexican migrant farm workers. The selection included ongoing workers as well as those who have stopped participating in the program.

Unlike those employed in the United States, who often come from the same rural towns and villages located in the western and northern regions of the country, Mexican farm workers in Canada live in the central region and are dispersed in communities in the states of Mexico, Tlaxcala, Guanajuato, Puebla, Hidalgo and Morelos. These geographic differences, coupled with the scant financial resources available for the implementation of the questionnaire, made information gathering particularly difficult. Consequently, sample selection was limited to towns with a relatively higher concentration of workers such as those in the States of Mexico, Tlaxcala and Morelos, which also offered the advantage of being closer to Mexico City.

The questionnaire, the main results of which are presented here, was designed to capture

information on various aspects of the farm workers experience in Canada. These included the problems they faced, their achievements and opinions on working conditions, their well-being while on the farms, and the use and impact of their remittances to Mexico. Other questions brought into focus the socio-economic characteristics of their households, their occupations and migration experience within Mexico and in the United States.

It is important to stress that the Mexican migrant farm worker experience in Canada has been the subject of very few empirical studies. In fact, until 1999, only one article had been published in Mexico on how seasonal farm workers from Mexico and the Caribbean have, since 1974, been supporting the production of fruits and vegetables in Canada, particularly in Ontario (Verduzco, 1999). Also, Tanya Basok published an excellent Canadian study in English entitled *Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Harvesters in Canada* (2002).

Migrant Farm Workers — Survey Results

Participation Levels in the SAWP

When the SAWP started in 1974, only 203 Mexican farm workers participated. Since then, their ranks have grown each year by 18 per cent on average (Table 1). During the first 10 years, an average of 550 farm workers participated annually. From 1985 onwards, participation levels soared and by 1989 the figures were eight times those recorded over the previous period. From 1990 to 1995, numbers stabilized with an average of 4,955 workers a year. In fact, since 1994 participation has inched upward and continues to grow by an average of 12.5 per cent a year.

Over the 28 years of the program's existence (based on figures released up to 2002), a total of 101,498 jobs have been created. Yet this number is not truly indicative of participation levels since, in many cases, a single migrant farm worker may have made several trips to Canada. Likewise, over the years, the program has evolved and become open to farm workers from any state in Mexico, not just those from the central region, as was the case up to 2000. This at-

tempt to provide all states with equal opportunities has meant a greater decentralization and a greater allocation of resources on the part of Mexican government officials in charge of the program.

Participation of Women

In 1989, when Canadian employers requested female migrant workers for the first time, 37 women answered the call. The following year, that number grew to 76 and remained fairly stable until 1998 with 145 female participants. In relative terms, women represent between one and 1.5 per cent from 1990 to 1997. In 1998, they accounted for 2.2 per cent and exceeded three per cent in 2001 and 2002 (Table 1).

The overall increase in female worker participation is largely due to an increased demand by Canadian employers, particularly strawberry growers.

Farm Worker Profile

Migrant farm workers come from rural municipalities where, in 2003, 70 to 90 per cent of heads of families earned less than \$82 CDN per week. At the onset of the program, Mexican authorities made it clear that, given the agricultural labour requirements in Canada, it would be very important to choose candidates from the countryside. Since the beginning they have sent primarily landed peasants or day labourers.

Of the farm workers surveyed, only 21 per cent owned small parcels of mostly rain-fed arable land, barely two hectares on average. Among these, only 12 per cent had some type of irrigation on their property. These figures paint a clear picture of hardship aggravated by the fact that there is very little anyone can do with such small parcels of non-irrigated land.

In addition, a significant number of migrant farm workers (44 per cent) combine their work as day labourers with non-agricultural

jobs. Those with access to croplands combine their work as poor peasants with various wage-paying jobs. The remainder (35 per cent) work mainly in construction, small business or service sectors.

Table 1: Worker Participation by Season 1974-2002

	# of workers	# of female workers	% of female workers	Nominal workers	% of nominal workers
1974	203				
1975	402				
1976	533				
1977	495				
1978	543				
1979	553				
1980	678				
1981	655				
1982	696				
1983	615				
1984	672				
1985	834				
1986	1,007				
1987	1,538				
1988	2,626				
1989	4,414	37	0.8	2,210	50
1990	5,143	76	1.47	2,480	48.2
1991	5,148	77	1.49	2,483	48.2
1992	4,778	77	1.6	2,880	60.3
1993	4,886	72	1.47	2,860	58.8
1994	4,910	48	0.97	2,906	59.2
1995	4,886	56	1.14	2,940	60.2
1996	5,211	57	1	3,314	63.6
1997	5,647	67	1.2	3,690	65.3
1998	6,486	145	2.2	3,529	54.4
1999	7,574	165	2.5	4,238	55.9
2000	9,175	230	2.5	4,620	50.35
2001	10,529	369	3.5	4,910	46.6
2002	10,681	339	3.2	7,297	68.3

The profile of farm workers employed in Canada mirrors that of the average head of household in most poor rural areas in Mexico. In fact, by any socio-economic standard, the profile is extremely similar. The only difference is that workers sent to Canada are selected based on their level of education, an average of 7.7 years compared to a rural average of between five and six years. This selection seems logical, since working in different country and cultural setting requires at least some basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic.

Stay in Canada and Ongoing Participation in the Program

On average, migrant farm workers stay in Canada for five months, and nearly half (43 per cent) do so for more than six months. A very small minority (four per cent) stay for less than two months while an equally small number end up working for up to eight months.

In addition, employers can select, by name, workers they already know and value. However, the Program Office in Mexico requires that workers be placed with the same employer at least twice before any changes are made. Based on the Program Office data in Mexico, the proportion of nominal Mexican workers relative to the total number of workers sent was between 48 per cent and 65 per cent from 1989 to 2000. In 2002, this proportion hit 68.3 per cent. From our survey, 61 per cent of all respondents have worked in Canada each year since they registered in the program.

In view of the above data, it is clear that over the years the program has been beneficial to both employers and workers and fostered a culture of collaboration, reciprocity and mutual respect. This benefit should not be viewed in isolation. In fact, as will be demonstrated later, it is the prism through which we can assess the effects of labour participation in Canada on Mexican households.

Labour Activity on Canadian Farms

Migrant farm workers in Canada are primarily harvesters, while a scant 13 per cent work in some other capacity (e.g., planting, greenhouse care, and packaging of fruits or vegetables). Though well-defined, the job is so basic that it hardly earns the workers any credit for a better job once they return to Mexico. However, when talking with the workers, it becomes obvious that their newly acquired

“status” or sense of empowerment comes from their multifaceted Canadian experience, from the airplane trip itself to confronting different languages and daily habits (e.g., walking through the streets, sending money back home, shopping, etc.). Quite possibly, the lessons learned in this environment are in themselves very valuable, although their lasting impact on the workers’ daily life and work once back in Mexico is not fully known.

No doubt, this impact could be a topic for further study using the appropriate methodology, a study that will transcend the simplistic view of migrant farm workers acquiring new skills in a

machine-intensive environment when, in reality, they are manual labourers and operate in an environment that demands a great deal of individual physical effort. That said, a distinct research approach could help uncover and/or redefine aspects yet to be factored into the relocation of workers and both the professional and personal experience acquired outside of Mexico.

On the other hand, it should be noted that migrant farm workers generally come from poor and marginalized rural communities or areas with low economic activity. This aspect, often overlooked or poorly investigated, has led to the assumption that remittances made by migrant farm workers could trigger production investments at home regardless of local socio-economic conditions. Until this assumption is further explored, we may never know which conditions foster or inhibit production investment by workers who have been outside the country.

Working Conditions in Canada

One quarter of the workers surveyed complained about the paperwork required in Mexico City, although the amount has diminished somewhat over the years. One fifth (20 per cent) reported heavy workload because they either

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worked more than 12 hours, often for several weeks straight. Almost one quarter (23 per cent) said that they were “mistreated,” primarily in reference to experiencing verbal abuse by their employers or having their health problems ignored while being overburdened with work. Physical abuse was reported in only three cases.

Despite these complaints, migrant farm workers are generally satisfied with the program and viewed it as positive. In fact, at the onset of the survey, they said repeatedly that they would prefer not to answer our questions if their opinions could cause problems or prevent them from continuing in the program.

Upon closer examination, this picture has several nuances. While the heavy workload is not the subject of much complaint, the fact that overtime is paid at the regular wage—with frequent workdays over 12 hours and sometimes for weeks in a row—is a common grievance. There is also a general feeling among workers that, compared to employers, theirs is a greater commitment, since they leave home not knowing when they will return while employers hire them for an indefinite period, sometimes for workdays of less than eight hours. In short, while they must be totally committed, employers can vary their plans and depress workers anticipated income.

In addition, workers spoke of a sense of isolation or emotional withdrawal, heightened by cultural and language differences, which inhibited their freedom and even prevented them from raising minor issues for fear of being sent back to Mexico. This emotional withdrawal results in a dehumanizing experience, a greater human cost that many workers take away, only to return due to their need for better wages. In her book, Tanya Basok (2002) considers this experience the most negative aspect of the program, one that also remains partly ignored by the workers themselves since, in their view, this program provides the only escape from the poor labour conditions and limited earning opportunities in Mexico.

Contractual Obligations and Wage Deductions

The SAWP was formally initiated through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the government of Canada and Mexico. It sets out the basic conditions of the agreement, which have been modified over the years as needed, including labour conditions and wages to be paid under Canadian law.

According to Canadian law, the workweek varies with the farming business but is most commonly defined as eight hours a day, six days a week and one day of rest. However, under certain conditions, given the unpredictability of farm produce, employers may request overtime.

Some workers surveyed indicated that, during their last season in Canada, they worked up to 17 hours a day, seven days a week. However, annualized, the average number of hours worked per day was 9.3 hours. For those who worked in January, the average was 8.5 hours per day, nine in February and March, 10 in April and seven in May. From June to October, the average stayed at 10 while in November and December it dropped slightly to nine hours a day. With the exception of January, workers generally averaged a seven-day workweek.

The majority of respondents (95 per cent) received an hourly wage. The others were paid by on a piecework basis, a practice more common in tobacco and strawberry farms. In 2002, the average wage was \$7.25 an hour. Also, all respondents worked overtime (hours above the eight-hour workday) and 91 per cent were paid for these hours, though, in almost every case, at the same rate as regular hours.

Wage Deductions

The majority of workers surveyed believed that wage deductions are too high. They also felt that some deductions were unfair and that others should not apply to foreign seasonal workers as neither they nor their families are entitled to the benefits. Since 1993, foreigners who work in Canada, even on a temporary basis, are subject to Employment Insurance (EI) premiums. Three

quarters of those surveyed considered this deduction unfair and were opposed to it. The rest did not answer because they were either not informed or unclear as to what amounts and items were deducted from their wages.

As for income taxes, workers who earn less than \$14,000 a year may, under Canadian law, file for and be reimbursed any income taxes paid. Among workers surveyed, 78 per cent had requested this reimbursement.

In view of the above, it is clear that there are labour and legal provisions in place which, though not entirely satisfactory, do protect migrant farm workers from greater exploitation. This risk is further mitigated by the joint involvement of the Foreign Agricultural Resource Management Services (FARMS) and HRSDC, as well as Mexican consulates and the STPS.

The legal status given to workers, coupled with institutional arrangements between STPS and HRSDC for oversight and control, is the main asset of the SAWP. Over the years, this asset has no doubt sustained the program and enhanced its profile by bringing together the two basic factors of production in a healthy way. These best practices should not be forgotten or set aside, as often seems to be the case with new Canadian labour practices in regards to foreign workers.

Income Earned from Working in Canada

On average, farm workers surveyed sent home \$4,835 at a cost of \$23.25 per transfer, or \$198 per worker considering the total number of transfers each season. They also spent an average of \$1,500 on basic living and other normal expenses during their stay in Canada.

Some take gifts back to their families each season. Among those surveyed, 67 per cent had done so at least once, each worker spending an average of \$475 on clothes, shoes or toys for their families. Workers preferred sending most of their earnings to Mex-

ico and keep as little as \$1,000 on their way home.

Impact of Savings/Earnings on Family Economic Situation

In the opinion of workers surveyed, 90.2 per cent believed that participation in the program had enabled them to improve their well-being and that of their families. For almost half of those who held this view (saying for instance "they live better now", "everything is better" or "they have a better quality of life"), the change was evident in their overall economic situation. For some (16 per cent), the improvement was seen in their ability to use the income earned in Canada to build their own houses or additions to the family home.

For others (12 per cent), who used phrases like "we don't go hungry," "I can buy clothes for my children" and "take care of the family," improvement in well-being meant they are able to meet the needs of their families. For some (7.3 per cent), what was most important was that their children were able to further their education. For a smaller segment (3.1 per cent), income earned in Canada created opportunities for investment by paying off debts, purchasing land or owning a business.

In most cases (86 per cent of those surveyed), the money workers sent home was the main source of family income and was used for educational, health care and other expenses not covered by the public purse. Indeed, although free primary education was available in all the towns where the respondents lived, the cost of school supplies, transportation and household goods was borne by parents and represented a significant portion of the family income. In fact, in towns with no middle or secondary schools, transportation costs must be factored in. Overall, the cost of education was a major concern and priority. According to many program participants, their children have been able to pursue their vocational or professional training thanks to the income they have earned working in Canada.

It should be recalled that these benefits, namely that participants work to improve their own well-

being and that of their families, constitute one of the underlying objectives of the program. It is therefore important to assess the program's impact. To this end, the data has been separated into three groups based on the number of seasons workers had participated.

Group A is made up workers who have been to Canada for 1 to 4 seasons from as early as 1986. They add up to 165 workers including 3 women (46.1 per cent of the respondents). In 2002, 23 of them were still involved in the program.

Table 2: Classification of Respondents by Number of Trips

Classification of workers surveyed by number of seasons worked in Canada	Number of workers	%
Group A. One to four season	165	46.1
Group B. Five to eight seasons	85	22.6
Group C. Nine or more seasons	112	31.3
Total number of workers	358	100

Workers in Group B, comprised of 85 men and three women (or 22.6 per cent of the total), made at least five and no more than eight trips to Canada . Most were first sent to Canada between 1989 and 1999.

Group C contains workers who have participated in the program for nine seasons or more from 1977 to 1994. In all, there are 112 workers, including 3 women in this group (or 31.3 per cent of the total).

The analysis of the above data is limited to the children of workers who have left school and are now primarily working (200 cases). According to the results which confirm what the workers stated verbally — that their participation in the program helped pave the way for their children's education — the children attained on average 9.8 years of schooling. This is 2.1 years more than their parents, who registered an average of 7.7 years of educa-

tion. It should also be noted that these worker's education average was already higher than that of their local communities.

On the other hand, while the children's higher educational achievements are consistent with national trends, the results, once analyzed based on the number of years workers have participated in the program, reveal sharp differences regarding the program's influence on the children's education. Of the total number of children of workers in Group C, 42.6 per cent attended school for 10 years or more. In Group B, the figure was 28 per cent, but it was only 15 per cent in Group A. In other words, 85 per cent of the children of workers who participated in the program for only a few years finished only the first years of schooling. That percentage drops in relationship with the number of years workers participate in the program (e.g. 72 per cent of those from Group B and 57.4 per cent of the children of workers in Group C).

However, as family cycle can have an influence on differences in education of the workers' children, the same exercise was performed based only on workers from similar age groups and with the same level of exposure to the program. Two possible effects can be observed this way. First, we must recognize the well-being that can arise simply with the progress of the family cycle based on the "age of worker" indicator. Second, we consider the well-being that results from a longer period of exposure to the program. For further comparison, workers are separated into two age groups (20 to 35 and 36 to 50), as each is indicative of different phases in the family cycle (Table 3). Also, the educational achievements of the children are categorized based on the number of trips their parents made to Canada under the program.

First, the children of workers in the two groups have on average a significant difference in their education level: eight compared to 9.9 years, or a difference of nearly two years. While 62 per cent of the children of younger workers managed to study for seven years or more, in the group of older workers, the figure rose to 87 per cent. This is another way of observing the two types of effects, and one that allows us to verify

how the two factors interact. Also, while only 8.1 per cent of the children of the younger workers achieved the highest level of education (10 years or more) 31 per cent of the children of older workers have achieved that same level.

Occupation of Workers and Family Members

There seems to be some correlation between the length of time workers have spent in the program and their children's achievements (Table 3). Of the 15 children that are now professionals 13 are children of workers in Group C, and seven of these went to the U.S. to work. This suggests that, in some cases, greater exposure to the program may have helped workers generate the savings or investments required to send their children to the U.S. All the same, given that these cases are very few, it is impossible to conclude that the children's move to the U.S. was an outcome of the Canadian program.

Table 3 also shows that a greater proportion of the children over 18 that continue to study come from workers in Group C, and a larger proportion are in the trades, commerce or service industries. Conversely, a much smaller proportion of these children work in agriculture, compared to the group with the least exposure.

Lastly, the data indicate that, within certain limits, the longer workers participate in the program, the greater the likelihood that their children will attain a higher level of education and find employment in areas other than in agriculture. To a certain extent, given the poor working conditions in the agricultural sector, there is a case to be made that the experience of migrant farm workers who travel to Canada translates into a process of upward social mobility for some of the children.

Overall Family Well-being

As already indicated, 93.1 per cent of workers surveyed stated that the program has im-

proved their well-being as well as that of their families. For workers in Group C (who have travelled the most to Canada), the response was always positive among the respondents. In Group B, it was 96.2 per cent, while Group A came in at 86.6 per cent. On the other hand, of the 24 workers who claimed their situation had not improved, 21 were in Group A and three were in Group B. It is possible that these workers needed more time in the program or that their assessment was based on reasons not explored in the questionnaire.

Conclusion

The SAWP is a successful program because, since its inception as a collaborative project between Canada and Mexico based on well-defined labour demand and supply needs of both countries, it has enjoyed the support of both governments. This support has served not only to reinforce its positive elements and outcomes, but also to maintain official channels conducive to the adaptation of the program over time.

Being authorized to work in Canada, migrant farm workers enjoy a different quality of life. This point cannot be underestimated since, unlike undocumented workers who depend on smugglers, participants in the program incur reduced travelling and overall living expenses, experience increased productivity and derive greater benefits from their work. Additionally, the practice of hiring young workers with family obligations in Mexico has helped maintain the seasonal nature of the program while minimizing the risk that some would remain underground in Canada.

The SAWP has been in place for over three decades and the supervision provided by both governments has helped reduce or prevent abusive practices that are all too common toward workers who, because of differences in language and culture as well as their low level of education, are more vulnerable than others. It would be very useful to keep these points in mind, especially now that the Canadian government has started implementing labour projects

with lower government involvement with other countries, including Mexico.

For instance, “pilot” programs initiated with Mexico allow some summer tourist centres to bring seasonal workers to Canada without a memorandum of understanding. Not only are these labour arrangements not subject to controls on the part of both governments, but workers are also hired directly by Canadian employers or via subcontractors. In short, workers come and go without necessarily being aware of their rights and obligations in Canada or how to seek help or redress should a work-related problem arise.

Seen in another light, and given cultural differences, language barriers and low educational levels, these workers are in a far more vulnerable position. In fact, though it is true that the financial cost of these new arrangements is much less for both countries, the human cost for the Mexican workers could be much higher given the opportunities for exploitation on the part of employers. These key issues will have to be addressed directly if

other types of problems are to be avoided in the future, problems that could undermine a binational labour relationship that has, until now, been harmonious and beneficial to both workers and employers.

Over the years, the experience and income acquired and earned in Canada by Mexican migrant farm workers have had a positive impact on their families back home. This impact is seen in the future prospects for the children through better educational and employment opportunities. As there is no specific research material on the subject, this impact needs to be explored beyond the confines of a survey in order to clearly establish how and why the labour experiences of workers in another country may trigger a process of social mobility for their children. Far from saying that all cases will yield similar results, advanced studies using adequate research tools and methods will help determine those aspects that ensure greater impact of international labour experiences on workers’ families.

Table 3: Education level of children no longer studying by worker's age and category

Education and category of travel	Children of workers between 20 and 35 years of age		Children of workers between 36 and 50 years of age	
Number of children	37	100%	86	100%
Group A	37	100%	26	
Group B	0		14	
Group C	0		46	
Average education	8		9.9	
Group A	8		9.7	
Group B	-		10.4	
Group C	-		9.9	
From 1 to 3 years of education	2	5.4%	0	
Group A	2	5.4%	0	
Group B	0		0	
Group C	0		0	
From 4 to 6 years of education	12	32.4%	11	12.8%
Group A	12	32.4%	3	11.5%
Group B	0		0	0
Group C	0		8	17.4%
From 7 to 9 years of education	20	54%	48	55.8%
Group A	20	54%	17	65.4%
Group B	0		9	64.3%
Group C	0		22	47.8%
From 10 to 12 years of education	2	5.4%	20	23.2%
Group A	2	5.4%	4	15.4%
Group B	0		4	28.6%
Group C	0		12	26%
More than 12 years of education	1	2.7%	7	8.1%
Group A	1	2.7%	2	7.7%
Group B	0		1	14.3%
Group C	0		4	8.7%

Table 4: Occupation of children over 18 years of age by worker category

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Total
Home	27	29	52	108
% of the group	30%	43.9%	27%	31%
Student	6	13	42	61
% of the group	6.6%	19.7%	21.8%	17.5%
Working in the US			7	7
% of the group			1.6%	2%
Commerce and services	13	6	30	49
% of the group	14.4%	9%	27%	14%
Trades	2	0	3	5
% of the group	2.2%		1.5%	1.4%
Labourers	3	3	1	7
% of the group	3.3%	4.5%	0.5%	2%
Professionals	2	0	13	15
% of the group	2.2%		6.7%	4.3%
Construction- bricklayers	6	1	4	11
% of the group	6.6%	1.5%		3.1%
Fieldworkers	31	13	36	80
% of the group	34.4%	19.7%	18.7%	22.9%
No information			4	4
Total	90	66	192	348

ENDNOTES

¹ This program began with Caribbean workers and was extended to Mexico in 1974.

² In 2003, the North-South Institute of Ottawa (NSI), Canada, commissioned a study on the SAWP in Mexico and some Caribbean countries. Collaborating with me on that paper was María Isabel de Lozano. The full report on Mexico can be obtained from the NSI or the author at the following address: gverduz@colmex.mx

³ In 2003, the minimum wage was \$39.70 pesos per day and the exchange rate with the Canadian dollar was \$6.70 pesos to the dollar. The sum of \$82 CAN per week was equal to two times the minimum wage.

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