



# FOCAL

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## Think local, act global: Labour migration and emerging challenges of policymaking in a transnational world

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper seeks to draw attention to some of the underlying dynamics of international migration from Central America in particular and Latin America and the Caribbean in general as part of a process of mutual interdependence between sending and receiving areas primarily through the incorporation of labour. Thus, migration is part of the broader process of globalization through the (dis)integration of labour markets in the Americas. This “integration” suffers relatively high levels of exclusion and marginalization due to the undocumented nature of many of the flows. At the same time, this interdependence is linking families and communities across borders forming translocal and transnational relationships in which new actors take their place on the global stage. This has led to new development dynamics linked to migration that offer a host of opportunities as well as reveal new problems and challenges, not the least of which have to do with local and national policy formation. Because of the transnational or translocal nature of many issues due to migration, institutions need to develop programs that stretch beyond their administrative borders in order to resolve problems at home.

### RESUMEN

Este trabajo aborda algunas de las fuerzas motrices que subyacen bajo el fenómeno de la migración internacional particularmente en América Central y en América Latina y el Caribe en sentido general como parte de la interdependencia mutua que se crea entre las regiones emisoras y las receptoras especialmente en lo que respecta a la migración de mano de obra. En este sentido, la migración forma parte del proceso general de globalización que se manifiesta en la (des)integración de los mercados laborales en América Latina. Tal “integración” se ve afectada por un alto grado de exclusión y marginalización debido a que muchos de los emigrantes carecen de documentación apropiada. Al mismo tiempo, esta interdependencia establece vínculos familiares y comunitarios que rebasan fronteras y da lugar a un tipo de relación extra-regional y transnacional de la que surgen nuevos protagonistas en la escena mundial. Esto ha conducido a nuevos esquemas de desarrollo que se vinculan al fenómeno de la migración, y que ofrecen muchas oportunidades pero también problemas y retos como es la elaboración de políticas locales y nacionales, por solo citar uno. Dado el carácter extra-regional y transnacional de muchos de los aspectos asociados a la migración, es necesario elaborar estrategias que sobrepasen las demarcaciones administrativas para poder solucionar los problemas locales.



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## RÉSUMÉ

Ce document veut attirer l'attention sur certaines des dynamiques sous-jacentes à la migration internationale à partir de l'Amérique centrale en particulier et de l'Amérique latine et des Caraïbes en général dans le cadre d'un processus d'interdépendance mutuelle entre les régions de départ et celles d'arrivée par le biais de l'incorporation de la main d'œuvre. Ainsi, la migration fait partie du processus plus vaste de la mondialisation par la (dés)intégration des marchés du travail dans les Amériques. Cette « intégration » donne lieu à des niveaux relativement élevés d'exclusion et de marginalisation en raison du manque de documentation sur bon nombre de ces flux de migrants. Dans le même temps, cette interdépendance sert de lien entre les familles et les communautés à travers les frontières; des relations translocales et transnationales se forment et de nouveaux acteurs prennent place sur la scène mondiale. Il en résulte de nouvelles dynamiques de développement liées à la migration qui offrent de nombreuses opportunités tout en mettant au jour de nouveaux problèmes et défis, dont certains sont liés à l'élaboration des politiques locales et nationales. Étant donné la nature transnationale et translocale de nombreux enjeux découlant de la migration, les institutions doivent élaborer des programmes qui débordent de leurs cadres administratifs pour résoudre les problèmes là où ils ont pris naissance.

### Introduction

In the small eastern municipality of Pasaquina, in La Unión, El Salvador, international labour migration has a visible impact through architecture. It is evident which homes were built with remittances sent by migrant relatives working in Manassas, Virginia. They sport geometrical designs on the front cement façade of the house painted with bright tropical colours and inside the floors are made from ceramic tiles found only in the wealthiest homes in the main urban centres. Modern two or three story homes have tall steep roofs, white aluminium framed windows, a small porch and front columns, and a satellite dish. These homes belong to the migrants. Not only do the migrants from Pasaquina build these types of houses in their communities, they are more than likely involved in the construction industry in the D.C. area building these same types of houses in North Carolina, Virginia and likely employed by contracting companies owned by Salvadorans. Clearly international labour migration between Pasaquina and Manassas has led to exchanges that go far beyond the simple reception of remittances.

While migration is not a new phenomenon, the volume and dynamics unleashed cannot be underestimated. Some basic data on remittance flows demonstrate the importance.

- Mexico reports \$10.5 billion dollars a year in family remittances, more than any other country in Latin America.
- On a world wide level, per capita remittances in El Salvador are second only to Jordan; remittances to Ecuador have grown faster than any country in the region with an estimated half million Ecuadorians emigrating between 1999 and 2001, many to Spain.
- Remittances by Haitians from the U.S or the Dominican Republic are more than four times

the official development assistance to the country.

- Nicaraguans send money home from the U.S as well as Costa Rica accounting for 14% of the GDP in 1999.<sup>1</sup>

This volume of people and money affects not only macroeconomic indicators but also community and family life. While truly impressive, it is the process behind the numbers that must be analyzed in order to assess policy and programmatic directions, especially ones that tend to be invisible due to the almost exclusive focus on remittances.

This paper seeks to draw attention to some of the underlying dynamics of international migration from Central America in particular and Latin America and the Caribbean in general as part of a process of mutual interdependence between sending and receiving areas primarily through the incorporation of labour. Thus this constitutes a form of “globalization from below” with a sort of de facto “integration” but with relatively high levels of exclusion and marginalization due to the undocumented nature of many of the flows. At the same time, this interdependence is linking families and communities across borders forming translocal and transnational relationships. These relationships are leading to new challenges in terms of local and national policy formation because of the transnational or translocal nature of many issues of migration, thus requiring institutions to develop programs that stretch beyond their administrative borders.

### Migration and the broader global process: the (dis)integration of labour markets in the Americas

International labour migration is recognized as being intimately tied to the *interdependence of national economies*.<sup>2</sup> Through broad dynamics of political

and economic relations among nation-states, the incorporation of individuals enters into play through the labour market. Thus the process of migration is not random but rather embedded in historical, political and economic relationships. For example, the migration of Turks to Germany and Senegalese to France directly relates to long-standing historical ties among those countries. Given that the main sphere of economic and political influence of the United States and Canada is with Latin America and the Caribbean, it is not at all surprising that the bulk of migration from the region takes place with these countries in the north.<sup>3</sup>

While these overarching processes can explain some of the flows, it is also important to look at *wage differentials* between countries. Those countries with generally higher wages tend to be the ones that attract migrants from countries with lower wages. Thus migration flows are generally from the south to specific areas in the north: Salvadorans to California, Texas and Washington D.C.; Guatemalans to Florida and southern California; Hondurans to Louisiana and southern California; Dominicans to New York and Massachusetts; Haitians to Illinois and Massachusetts as well as Montreal and Quebec; Nicaraguans to Florida and California, Ecuadorians and Peruvians to New York. However, there are also several important dynamics *within* the region that need to be highlighted. Concretely, in addition to labour flows north, Nicaraguans also work in Costa Rica and the eastern part of El Salvador. Colombians can be found in New York as well as Venezuela. Haitians are not only in Florida and French speaking Canada but also in the Dominican Republic. Thus many countries within the region, like the Dominican Republic, can be considered simultaneously “sending” and “receiving” countries.

The type of employment migrants’ work in is also very important and relates to job opportunities or lack thereof in the home as well as receiving areas. The lack of work in the home community or country for women or men from urban or rural residents, of differing educational levels, as well as the availability of employment for these groups in receiving areas has a lot to do with who migrates and why. Many migrant women from Latin America and the Caribbean tend to work in the hotel and tourism industry in places like Las Vegas, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica. Caring for children or working in domestic services in the homes of middle and upper class families in

Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic or San José, Costa Rica is the predominant employment for women. Agricultural employment is an important economic sector for migrant work: Mexicans, Hondurans, Guatemalans and Nicaraguans can be found harvesting crops in Southern Ontario and British Columbia, Washington State, Florida, California, and Texas; and Nicaraguan men harvest crops in Costa Rica and eastern El Salvador. Construction is yet another important sector of employment in many urban areas with migrants. Canada is currently studying a change in policy to extend the temporary visas from six months to two years in order to meet the employment demands in this sector. Meatpacking and poultry processing in smaller communities throughout the mid-west, east coast and southern United States and Canada has become a predominant migrant activity for Mexicans and Central Americans. Thus, while Los Angeles is the second largest Salvadoran city, Fayetteville in Arkansas had the highest annual growth rate

between 1990 and 2000 of Salvadorans for any city in the U.S. mainly due to the fact that Tyson foods, the world’s largest poultry processor, has its headquarters there.<sup>4</sup>

How migrants arrive at their final destination is also intimately linked to *social networks*. Migration is embedded in the local relationships of kinship and other types of community ties such as ethnicity and neighbourhood or territory. People do not just move to other areas

based on historical political ties between countries or because the pay is better in another place. They do so because they know someone from their family or community that provides them with information about opportunities, help in resettlement including a home to live in, and possibly even a job. Thus, migrants from the municipality of Pasaquina in eastern El Salvador can be predominately found in Manassas, outside of Washington D.C., employed in domestic services, or working in the removal of asbestos from public buildings or construction. Indigenous migrants from San Pedro Soloma in Guatemala live in Delaware processing poultry. Mixteco migrants from Mexico travel the harvest circuit in various agricultural activities throughout the U.S.. Garifuna migrants from the Atlantic coast of Honduras, Guatemala and Belize live in the rough neighbourhoods of South Central in Los Angeles as well as the Bronx and Brooklyn in New York.

Migration is a highly embedded process that

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establishes a web of *translocal ties* and exchanges among families, communities and countries. “Receiving countries” need migrant labour for their economies to function as they do in the global market place and “sending countries” rely upon this external labour market as an escape valve for employment of certain sectors of the population as well as the remittances that are sent home. Because of this process of interdependence and embeddedness, international labour migration is now a structural part of life for many of the countries, communities and households throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Transnational/translocal exchanges linked to migration and the emergence of new actors**

Because social networks are an intimate part of the migration process in globalization, many migrants maintain contact with their place of origin. This is greatly facilitated by the dramatic transformation in communication and transportation in the last half century. Rather than sever ties, multiple types of exchanges begin to take place over distance between families and communities. In general, these can be categorized as economic, socio-cultural and political flows between specific locales, which gain importance as more families in a community become involved in migration.

The most visible and tangible are those of an economic nature, but even among these some have received greater attention than others. By far, the most recognized and studied economic exchanges are the millions of dollars in family remittances sent home by migrants. While debate continues to rage about how families should better use these funds, in general they should be seen as a source of household income generated through employment, albeit outside the local or national labour market.<sup>5</sup> Other types of economic flows related to migration between sending and receiving locales include new types of businesses that form based on serving this *migrant economy*. These include the intermediary remittance businesses from large multinationals like Western Union, to Latin American banks (*i.e. Banco Solidario* from Ecuador; Banco Agrícola Comercial from El Salvador), to the Latin American versions of DHL (Gigante Express for El Salvador; King Express for Guatemala) and other ethnic couriers, to thousands of small and self employed business people (*encomenderos or viajeros*

in Spanish) who travel at least monthly carrying money, packets, messages, and goods to sell. Other important economic activities in this vast migrant economy include telecommunications, nostalgic trade, nostalgic tourism, transnational legal services, and construction.<sup>6</sup>

These are not the only types of flows that go back and forth between migrant sending and receiving communities. Socio-cultural exchanges, although less tangible, impact not only the migrant but also those that do not migrate. For example, the *quinceañera* party financed and planned in elaborate detail in the U.S. but celebrated in Zacatecas, Mexico, mixes cultural and social expressions from both societies. Beauty queens in Houston are selected based on their ability to raise funds for their hometown in Guatemala, a place they may never have visited but has become part of their identity and social and cultural heritage. Young men participate in the hundreds if not thousands of soccer teams and

leagues (or baseball in the case of the Dominican Republic or Nicaragua) that form part of migrant social life in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., Miami, and New York. At the same time, they may also support a local team in the hometown or country. The Archdiocese of San Salvador sent a replica of the “Saviour of the World” monument to Los Angeles for the August patron saint festivities held in that city in California. One of the main variations was that this Jesus, instead of wearing sandals,

donned tennis shoes, a symbol of U.S. culture and commercialism linked to migrants. These are not just simple reproductions of activities from one place to another but involve translocal exchanges and flows.

Political exchanges are also multiple and varied. In addition to issues related to legal status and the voting rights of migrants, underlying the discussion are changes related to organizing styles and an appropriation of rights and citizenship based on the sending area but also on the receiving country. For example, Hometown Associations (HTAs) or grassroots migrant organizations, in New York, reproduce organizational structures from the home country but may also seek non-profit status in the U.S. in order to demonstrate a certain level of institutionalism. The levels of transparency and accountability demanded by the supporters of the hometown association in their new country require different standards from that in the places of origin, as the Balsamo Foundation in El Salvador discovered

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*Migration is a highly embedded process that establishes a web of translocal ties and exchanges among families, communities and countries*

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upon building a relationship with a group of philanthropic Salvadorans in Edmonton, Canada. The levels of documentation and restrictions regarding the use of funds for community projects in the beneficiary communities in some hometowns mean that local counterparts become involved in this form of social accountability and fiscalization. The process is onerous and bureaucratic. At other times, this same process serves as a source of deep distrust when money cannot be accounted for and can be misused or embezzled. In some cases, elected authorities welcome these processes, thus contributing to a deepening of democratic practice. There are situations where local elected officials block efforts of migrants, seeing these as a threat to their authority. In other situations, some associations serve as new scenarios of “clientelism”, possibly replacing old forms of clientelism but not the system of exclusive rights, benefits and reciprocity. This is found when the President of a hometown association garners exclusive personal benefits in the community of origin based on his privileged tie between local authorities or leaders and migrants; he may even become the new “cacique” replacing old schemes of privilege in rural areas.

These economic, social and political exchanges form a multilayered web of translocal flows that clearly demonstrate the importance of looking beyond family remittances. And as a result, new actors emerge and old actors have begun to pay attention as migration changes the local community. These new actors include *encomenderos*, coyotes, hometown associations, transnational entrepreneurs, and possibly even youth gangs.

As a result of the growing importance of migration and these new actors, other institutions such as local churches, local and national governments, foundations, multilateral agencies and NGOs have been responding to the opportunities and challenges that are emerging. However, much of the focus has been placed on the more tangible aspects of these transnational relationships (specifically remittances), leaving many of the underlying issues surrounding international labour migration unquestioned and unattended.

### Development dynamics and migration

As more and more institutions have become interested in the development potential of migration, especially in sending communities, different types of initiatives have emerged. These can be broadly

grouped into five sets of development dynamics linked to migration: family remittances; collective donations for home community improvement; transnational entrepreneurial activities; negotiating family and community ties translocally; and the precariousness of certain translocal labour markets.

*Family remittances:* Economic exchanges, and particularly remittance transfers, have received the bulk of attention in discussions concerning migration. Much of the discussion continues to centre on the so called “productive uses of remittances” assuming that families that receive these funds use them unproductively, unwisely and almost exclusively for consumption, and even in some cases conspicuous consumption. Various studies over the last two decades have shown that these assumptions are not so straightforward.<sup>7</sup>

Remittances from international labour migration prove to be a relatively important strategy to improve income levels, reduce poverty, garner savings and investment funds, and help ensure access to education so children stay in school over a longer period of time. They also serve as social safety net for health care emergencies, deaths in the family, income for the elderly, or for recouping after a natural disaster. In various studies, it has been shown that the spending structure of households that receive remittances compared with those that do not are essentially the same: approximately 80% of all household income is used for “consumption”, regardless of whether or not a family has access to dollars from abroad. What these households do have is a little more income to use to ease the everyday household needs and ensure that the basic needs are covered.

The circulation of large amounts of remittances in the local economy also has multiplier effects with both positive and negative outcomes including inflation within local economies. It certainly can be argued that some of the sorts of spending and “investment” in the construction of multiple story houses, with all the North American luxuries are clearly conspicuous consumption that could have been more strategically invested; however, these are strategies that fit within the overall dynamics of global consumption. Remittances and migration, clear examples of the failure of the local economy to provide viable and attractive employment, can hardly be the exclusive ingredients for turning unproductive locales and activities into productive ones. While capital is essential and remittances can and should be

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*Remittances and migration (...) can hardly be the exclusive ingredients for turning unproductive locales and activities into productive ones*

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seen as a source of capitalization, many other factors such as skills, know-how, infrastructure, general macroeconomic environment are important factors related to local economic development.

Over the last several years, some major players have entered into the picture and focused attention on two specific aspects of family remittances: *reducing the cost of transfers* and *“banking the unbanked”*. A particularly promising relationship for the transfer of remittances is being established between community-based credit unions in Spain, Canada, the United States, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica and El Salvador. While these mechanisms are a relatively small share of the market, they tend to be the least expensive way to send money. The credit union potential is important not only for the lowering of costs. Probably much more significant is what is being called “banking the unbanked”, where financial services are extended to those who have not previously had access. In this sense, remittance intermediation is a means for *leveraging these funds to generate multiplier effects*, such as the opening of a savings account or taking out a loan.

Migrants, wherever they are, tend to lack access to financial services due to a number of obstacles including identification, irregular legal status, and language barriers and being part of the underserved poor. Their families in certain home communities may also lack access. Credit unions or other alternative financial organizations may not overcome all of these factors, but they are more likely to extend basic financial services to underserved communities and areas. Alternative financial organizations are important actors for local economic development be this through savings programs, loans for small business or agricultural activities or other financial services that large private banks tend not to offer in these places. By increasing membership and participation, these institutions not only help individuals and households, but they can also become stronger local organizations, thereby *having multiplier effects in the local economy*. When these institutions focus their efforts in supporting small local businesses, agricultural producers, artisans, or other underserved sectors of the economy, they can be important agents of change. Transferring remittances can serve as a mechanism for attracting new clients or members, extending other financial and non-financial services to these people, as well as strengthening the institution itself.

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*The most significant new actors linked to transnational migration in Latin America are the Hometown Associations*

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*Hometown Associations*: The most significant new actors linked to transnational migration in Latin America are the Hometown Associations (HTAs). These community based grassroots organizations function predominantly on a volunteer basis with differing levels of organizational and institutional structuring. They provide a space for gathering among migrants who celebrate various festivities just as in their hometown or country. Additionally, they generally carryout activities to respond to a common concern or need in the hometown and raise money, collect in-kind donations or use lobbying skills for specific projects in the home community.<sup>8</sup> Typical projects can be categorized into four groups: a) charity (support for residential homes for the elderly, repatriation of cadavers, etc.); b) human development (scholarships, support for health clinics or campaigns, sports teams, etc.); c) infrastructure (building of roads, schools, water projects, etc.), and a very few incipient d) business or productive projects (a vegetable and fruit processing cooperative in El Salvador; a rum plant in Mexico).

Some associations link up with specific individuals or institutions such as the local priest, the cultural centre, school, or local government; others collaborate with already existing local development committees and yet some establish their own committees with whom they coordinate. Some of these committees

were born out of initiatives of the migrants themselves, while others respond to specific petitions or emergencies, such as the devastation caused but Hurricane Mitch. Over time some have been able to consolidate their efforts even obtaining non-profit recognition in the U.S. or Canada, while others remain relatively informal.

There are important differences among countries of the region and the level of organizing and activity among these groups. Nicaraguan and Honduran groups in the U.S. tend to be less linked to a specific hometown and more likely to join together to support a charity cause based on their broad national origin. By far, the most numerous and organized are the Mexican Clubs. But Guatemalan, Salvadoran and Dominican groups are also well recognized. Additionally, there are groups that are based on ethnic identity such as indigenous Guatemalans, Oaxacan, Mixteco or Garifuna. There are an estimated 60 Guatemalan *“fraternities”* in the Los Angeles area.

The Salvadoran government estimates that there are over 250 Salvadoran organizations outside the country, most located in the L.A. area. In contrast, there are only five Honduran groups in Southern California.

Another important feature among some of the groups are the coalitions. The Mexicans have broad-based Federations based on state of origin; the Association of Guatemalan Fraternities (AFG) is made up of 19 groups; Communities United for the Development of El Salvador is a coalition of 20 Salvadoran groups in Los Angeles. Additionally, there are several efforts under way to share organizing experiences among HTAs from various countries: this includes work by ENLACES America among Mexican and Central American groups in Chicago, Houston, Miami, and Washington D.C., as well as an effort through the University of Southern California (USC) to build bridges between Mexican and Central American groups.

Despite these encouraging initiatives, the HTAs in general must overcome many obstacles. Many leaders have little or no formal training in development issues. Rather, they volunteer their free time after their jobs as carpenters, janitors, domestic workers, or business people. They do not always select the best partners with whom to work with in the home community. Nor do they make the best decisions about which sorts of projects to support. In most cases, men are responsible for the leadership while women continue to support through traditional roles, like cooking and selling food to raise funds. HTAs confront enormous challenges relating to the incorporation of young people. Some suffer internal divisions, which have even led to the dissolution of the group. Some leaders are almost perpetually self-appointed while in other cases internal elections take place. In some situations, resources have been misused or transparency has broken down. Some organizations may become politically co-opted or facilitate *quid pro quo* arrangements. In some cases, the HTA may actually have more voice and vote than local residents.

Despite these challenges, HTAs have generated an enormous amount of interest among various multilateral organizations, US and Canadian federal government aid agencies as well as Non Governmental Organizations and both national and local governments of the countries of origin.

They are viewed as organizations that could be the new partners and financial backers of various local development initiatives, as well as the potential motor for investing in business activities. Without a doubt, HTAs can be important partners for local development. These private community organizations need support as well as oversight, and while they should not be overlooked, their role should not be overemphasized. Relatively speaking, the amount of money sent back home is still small. Nonetheless, Orozco (2003) has found that among Mexican associations, the proportion HTAs contribute to local community development projects is greater in smaller communities. But what may be more important is the political clout they are able to wield. This makes it more imperative that they receive some basic support for organizational strengthening by building on already existing efforts to do just this.<sup>9</sup>

*Transnational entrepreneurial activities:* The process of migration leads to other economic exchanges

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*migration leads to other economic exchanges beyond just family remittances and the intermediaries that transfer them*

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beyond just family remittances and the intermediaries that transfer them, or the hometown donations. Many migrants take advantage of their savings, newly acquired skills or contacts in order to engage in business opportunities that span places. Portes and Guarnizo (1991) first brought attention to these dynamics highlighting the way in which migrant entrepreneurs engaged in “tropical capitalism”. Several other studies since then have noted not only a flourishing of

new economic activities that previously did not exist, such as *encomenderos*, but also the transformation of other types of business ventures based on migration. Orozco has even described these as the five “T”s of transnational entrepreneurial activities: transfers, trade, travel, tourism and telecommunications. Other economic sectors include legal services, construction as well as the market of used goods peddled in the south.

The volume of these activities should not be underestimated. The transfer of family remittances is a multimillion-dollar industry. Trade opportunities with the nostalgic market have been important selling points for pushing for the U.S.- Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) in the region, arguing that with free trade, Salvadorans will be able to more freely export food products to not only Salvadoran migrants but also the vast Latino market in the U.S. Otavalan migration between Ecuador and Spain has been recognized as one rooted

in trade opportunities. Airline companies have taken advantage of certain routes and expanded others based on migrant travel: the Salvadoran airline, TACA, opened up its newest routes between San Salvador and Boston or San Salvador and Toronto due to the growing travel potential of the Salvadoran and Central American population, not international tourists. Nostalgic tourism is a growing activity in the region, especially when people come to visit on holidays like Christmas, Easter and the local patron saint festivities. Diasporic Caribbean celebrations also generate millions of dollars in revenues in cities like London and Toronto. And the expanding access to telephones throughout Latin America has led to growing revenues for telephone companies in both sending and receiving countries.

*Negotiating Family and Community Ties Translocally:* While much less tangible, family and community dynamics that emerge from transnational migration are extremely important. Because they are less tangible, policy and programmatic formation is made more complicated. Additionally, the institutionalism necessary for carrying out a translocal family or community support program is also problematic.

Negotiating family relationships is difficult enough these days without having to include distance into the equation. However, as international migration continues to increase, this is becoming more of a way of life for many families. The impact of migration within families depends not only on distance and length of time but also on whom it is within the family that migrates and the role they had within the household prior to migration and how this changes after migration. The impact in specific communities (sending or receiving) will also vary depending on the percentage of households linked to migration. While it is important to highlight that the vast majority of migrants remain linked to their households in the home country, this is not the case for all, and is almost surely fraught with gendered and generational tensions. Moreover, given that for most of Latin America the social safety net in place relies upon family ties, when translocal family and community relationships break down, new vulnerabilities emerge.

Thus, in some communities where it is predominantly the male head of household who migrates, when the family bonds break down, households headed by women with young children may face even greater

problems. These women are virtually powerless to demand child support since there is absolutely no institutional framework for demanding this transnationally. It is hard enough to obtain child support when both parents live in the same country, and when one of the parents abandons his or her responsibilities outside of the national boundaries, rather than resolve economic problems of the household, migration creates new ones. At the same time, parents may not wish to continue sending financial support because they may have no way of guaranteeing that funds are used to ensure the basic needs of their children. In Santa Eulalia, Guatemala, some women complained that their in-laws exercised an even more intrusive role in their lives after their husbands migrated, since remittances were sent to them rather than directly to the spouse.

Other sets of family vulnerabilities emerge when both adult parents migrate leaving behind children with other relatives. Issues concerning authority may break down in some but not all cases, leading to other psychosocial problems within the family. When young men and women with no family responsibilities of their own migrate, their elderly parents may face the breakdown of family support networks that traditionally ensured their care in their old age. When this means that adult children stop sending financial support in the form of remittances, this only exacerbates vulnerabilities for the elderly. In communities where a large proportion of the working age population has left, this may become a particularly acute problem.

Deportation of young migrants with criminal records has also been mentioned as well as the spreading of youth gangs. While police and policy-makers in Central America blame this phenomenon on the deportation of young Central American gang members in the U.S., authorities in Washington D.C. talk of the “exportation” of gang members from El Salvador to the streets of the capitol. Youth violence is a much more complex phenomenon than simply implied in this transnational blame game. It is not clear how youth gangs are connected to the process of migration, or whether or not they engage in transnational practices involving economic, socio-cultural and political exchanges between different locales. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that the Mara Salvatrucha and 18th Street Gangs were born on the streets of Los Angeles and can now be found in cities and towns in southern México, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Likewise,

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the Bloods and Crips, two well-recognized African-American gangs from south central Los Angeles can be found in towns in Belize, linked to Garifuna youth.<sup>10</sup>

These examples highlight different types of vulnerable groups: single parent households; children; youth; and the elderly. The specific types of problems that emerge in communities will vary based on the migration process as well as the level of community cohesion and social fabric that is maintained translocally. Hence, not only family bonds, but ethnic ties also play a particularly important role in ensuring certain translocal relationships. These relationships face enormous limits as well and can be strained over time and distance, and may not always result in desirable outcomes for some of the family or community members.

In these situations, the role of the local church can be of critical importance and in fact may be one of the few actors able to play a part in facilitating translocal family and community ties simultaneously in all the Americas. The local parish priest in Santa Eulalia has played a critical role in organizing migrants in Los Angeles who have been supporting a hospital project back home as well as an innovative community “health insurance program”. At the same time, he continues to be a pastor to the members of the community even after they have moved to another country. The Dioceses of Cuenca in Ecuador together with the Dioceses of Brooklyn in New York have established teleconference centres in response to some of the social problems that Ecuadorian families face due to difficulties in communication.

Other examples of church collaboration transnationally include several arrangements for Spanish speaking priests to be sent from Latin America to the U.S. to pastor to the growing Latin American population in that country. A seminary in El Salvador has an arrangement with the Archdioceses in the Washington D.C. area in which Salvadoran priests have served in Washington, Virginia, Maryland and Kentucky. The Dioceses in Cuenca, Ecuador, has done the same in New York. In Haiti, hundreds of parishes facilitate some sort of link with the migrant population, mostly in the U.S. but also in the Dominican Republic. Sister relationships have been established between the Dioceses of Wilmington, Delaware and San Marcos, Guatemala or between Youngstown, Ohio and the Dominican Republic largely due to migration. In fact, only the church,

specifically the Catholic Church, has the translocal institutional structure that can make this type of interaction functional and focus on maintaining and strengthening family and community ties and social structures despite the distance.

*Precarity of Certain Translocal Labour Markets:* Much of the migration in the region has to do with finding employment. The types of jobs that migrants engage in vary, but it is probable that migrants are more likely to be exposed to work related hazards than other employees. One of the basic reasons has to do with the undocumented legal status of many migrants who may be unaware of the risks they face, may not realize that they have certain labour and human rights regardless of their status or are reticent to seek improved conditions precisely because of their less than full rights. These vulnerable situations generate not only direct problems for workers but also impact the local community and may even be transferred back home, further taxing already precarious social systems.

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*In fact, only the church (...) has the translocal institutional structure that can make this type of interaction functional*

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While all jobs have certain types of risk, several stand out: domestic labour, due to the abuse women face behind private doors; agricultural work, due to the exposure of pesticides and herbicides; certain construction related work such as the removal of asbestos; and employment in meat and poultry processing that have become some of the most dangerous jobs in the north. Organizing and rights education for migrant workers takes place in the U.S. and Canada but it certainly is not widespread. Legal advice and representation is available in some cases but again is much more difficult to ensure because their legal status and the mobility of some workers, especially those engaged in seasonal agricultural employment.

The problems created from the use of chemicals in food production or the way in which meat and poultry are produced in the north affects not only migrant workers but also local communities, negatively impacted through the environment, disease or illness transferred through food.<sup>11</sup> Negative impacts may also be transferred to home communities when migrants return due to injury or illnesses and are no longer employable. It may very well be that in Pasaquina, El Salvador, in ten to twenty years, cancer caused from asbestos removal in Washington D.C. may be a serious health problem for former migrants. Thus the working conditions of migrants are an important labour rights issue for sending communities and countries, but one

that has been completely ignored by both sending and receiving governments. Many migrants' rights organizations face tremendous obstacles from some labour unions that see the problem as one in which migrant workers supposedly take away jobs from the native born population. For the most part, native residents have absolutely no desire to engage in this type of employment because of the relatively lower pay, the hard work involved, and hazardous working conditions.

### **The need for transnational/translocal socio-economic policies**

Certainly these dynamics pose enormous problems but they also allow for new opportunities. The greatest challenge has to do with the fact that in order to resolve local problems or take advantage of certain opportunities various actors must work translocally. Thus, rather than "think global, act local", translocal labour migration in this global world requires organizations, groups, governments and the church to "think local, but act global". In other words, local leaders, priests and governments in Cuenca, Ecuador, need to be engaged with local leaders, priests and governments in Brooklyn, New York; or between Delaware and the indigenous highlands of Guatemala; or between South Central Los Angeles and Livingston, Guatemala or Belize; or among Haitian actors in Haiti, the Dominican Republic and specific cities like Chicago or Montreal.

In terms of public policies, probably the central government institution that should be spearheading these initiatives is the respective ministries of Labour or Employment in sending countries. For example, the Salvadoran Minister of Labour should ensure better working conditions for Salvadoran employees in the U.S. After all, the U.S. Trade Representative works to ensure certain standards of working conditions for Salvadoran workers in free trade zones in El Salvador, so why shouldn't the Salvadoran government defend its workers in the U.S? This could include not only intergovernmental agreements but also sectoral outreach and rights education in transnational spaces. Thus campaigns to ensure better remuneration and working conditions for Salvadoran domestic workers should be carried out in El Salvador as well as Los Angeles and Washington D.C. Improving labour conditions in particularly hazardous jobs, such as agriculture should also be part of a transnational agenda of the agricultural ministries of México and Guatemala.

Other government agencies that need to coordinate efforts transnationally due to the dynamics of

migration can include the Ministry of Education, the police, those responsible for child welfare, and health care officials. Local governments may need to link together transnationally to resolve common problems that are related to dynamics far from "home". Thus in certain towns in Delaware, it may make more sense for the Mayor to engage the City Council in San Pedro Soloma and vice versa.

Because of these relationships, rethinking migration policy, however urgent, is no longer sufficient. Clearly, new arrangements and agreements surrounding migration policy need to be developed through out the Americas. Regardless of what will transpire on this front, the need for other policy-makers and institutions to forge transnational agendas and programs is already pressing. The task at hand then is to understand this, make it visible and move beyond the borders that currently enclose us.

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> MIF, IADB (2001) “Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean: Comparative Statistics”, <http://www.iadb.org/mif/v2/files/Comparativeremittan.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Other types of migration take place that is not necessarily related to labour markets, for example, family reunification and migration due to war or hunger. While these dynamics are certainly present in the Americas, by far the most important issue has to do with labour. See Robinson, 2003, Sassen, 1998; 2001

<sup>3</sup> One notable difference has to do with the massive migration of Ecuadorians to Spain in the last five years.

<sup>4</sup> For more in depth analysis on these labour market issues see, López, Popkin and Tellez;1999; Striffler, 2002, or Andrade-Eekhoff, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> For a more in depth analysis see Goldring 2003, or Taylor, et.al. 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Nostalgic trade and tourism refer to activities that cater to the migrant population. The longing to taste cheese,

meet, tamales, chicken, liquor, sweet breads from the homeland is seen as a huge market and the first foot in the door for exporting to the wider Latino community in the north. Migrant tourism refers to the thousands of migrant “tourists” that return to visit for special occasions like Christmas, Easter, Patron Saint festivities, etc. Manuel Orozco from the Interamerican Dialogue has been collecting data concerning all these activities across multiples countries in Latin America and the Caribbean demonstrating the volume and importance of these types of economic exchanges. See also Portes, Guarnizo, and Haller (2002).

<sup>7</sup> See Goldring, 2003; Taylor, et.al, 1999; and Hunneycutt, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that these organizations do not collectively gather individual family remittances but rather fundraise in quite creative ways to obtain the support needed.

<sup>9</sup> There are several particularly important efforts already underway. This includes the program through USC, another one with El Rescate and COMUNIDADES; ENLACES America; CARECEN in Houston with CARECEN in El Salvador; the Migration and Development program through the Universidad de Zacatecas, and training programs being carried out by the Pan American Development Foundation.

<sup>10</sup> See Smutt and Miranda, 1999; and Miller Matthei and Smith 1998 for more analysis.

<sup>11</sup> *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Scholsser provides an excellent analysis of the way in which meat processing has changed and how more and more Mexican and Central American migrants are involved in these extremely dangerous jobs.

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