

Migration and Development: Encounters and Disconnects

By Jonathan Fox

These days one might think that the connections between migration and development are straightforward. After all, persistent underdevelopment clearly encourages migration, both from the countryside to cities and across national borders. The growth in migrant worker remittances, combined with the spread of organized hometown associations, has provoked widespread optimism about prospects for investing in cross-border community development. Yes, migration and development are clearly linked, but specifying the nature of those linkages turns out to be easier said than done. The search for positive synergy between development and migration agendas is under way, and the Inter-American Foundation is well-positioned to contribute to this incipient momentum by supporting capacity-building, field-testing and learning about those grassroots initiatives that take migration into account. To understand the challenges that such strategies must address, however, it is worth first recognizing some of the “disconnects” that have kept the migration and development agendas at arms-length, at least until recently.

For starters, most of the practitioners and analysts working on issues of migration and development still have remarkably little to do with each other. Each agenda usually treats the other as “other.” From the development side, for most of those with a macro perspective, big-picture policy reforms are implicitly assumed to provide alternatives to migration—the current version of “trickle-down” economics. (Recall that NAFTA was sold in the U.S. as a recipe for reducing migration.) Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, many development practitioners, analysts and community leaders still refer to migrants as those who “abandon” their communities, even though many sustain community membership from afar.

From the migration side, the huge volumes of remittances have generated a vast amount of attention. So far, framing migration and development issues through the lens of remittance flows has concentrated on how financial institutions can capture the funds, with less concern for what happens on the ground in home communities. While “banking the unbanked” is certainly important to those sending remittances, the connection to broader development remains uncertain. For migrants and their families,

the most tangible impact of the widespread public discussion has been the reduction in transaction costs, driven also by increased private-sector competition. Almost all of the billions transferred are considered for “consumption,” a term that obscures family investments in education and housing. Cutting-edge government programs supporting collective social remittances, like Mexico’s three-for-one match, have a significant track record that analysts are carefully examining, but the program’s high public profile contrasts remarkably with its practical application. In 2004, the Mexican Social Development Ministry budget spent about \$18 million, less than 1 percent of its budget, matching migrant-generated funds for social development projects in migrants’ home communities, and almost none of these funds supported productive projects.

In spite of almost a decade of discussion, there is still little tangible evidence of remittance investments that generate sustainable jobs beyond a few micro-level cases. This should not be surprising, given the dearth of investment opportunities in so many sending communities, as well as the critical need for on-the-ground entrepreneurial capacity. But the obstacles are not exclusively economic. When migrants pool their hard-earned money for hometown projects, they place a premium on those investments that provide benefits to the community as whole; most job-creating investments directly affect only a small subset of the community. This suggests the importance of identifying those productive investments that also have “public goods” effects, such as improved coffee-processing infrastructure in communities where most people depend on coffee and already have years of experience working together in a marketing co-op.

Two decades ago, analysts saw the migration process as drawing away human capital and leadership, leaving communities’ worse off. Today, migrant remittances and returning migrants are increasingly seen as potential development resources. As usual, where one stands depends on where one sits. Is migration the problem or the solution? When the experienced co-op organizer or organic coffee certifier chooses to try his or her luck up north, migration appears to be a solution for the individual but a serious problem for the organization.

Creative practitioners and analysts are beginning to address this longstanding disconnect between migration and development agendas. The University of Zacatecas-based *Migración y Desarrollo* international research network is making a critical contribution, as is the Chicago-based public interest group Enlaces Americas that helps Mexican and Central American migrant organizations build their capacity to engage in development policy debates. Cross-border membership organizations like the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB) support grassroots development agendas both in communities of origin and in communities of settlement. Organizations like the FIOB are consolidating their participatory grassroots microcredit networks back home, to build a locally accountable institutional base that could effectively receive and invest remittances.

In an effort to craft a new way of framing the relationship between migration and development, Mexican rural development strategist Armando Bartra bridges the migration, development and rights agendas with the call for respect for “the right to not [have to] migrate.” After all, the Mexican Constitution’s Article 123 speaks of citizens’ right to “dignified and socially useful work.” The “right to not migrate” can be a useful bridging concept for promoting reflection and discussion between diverse and sometimes disparate actors who see the process differently. This principle recognizes that while migration is an option, it is a choice made within a context imposed by public policies that favor some development strategies over others. The idea also suggests that the term “migration policy” is a bit deceptive insofar as it is often limited to those policies that deal with migrants, such as matching funds for projects, or protection from police abuse on the way home for the holidays. The idea of “migration policy” should also take into account how the full range of public policies, such as the withdrawal of support for family farming, affects the decision to migrate. Yet translating a useful framing concept into practical strategies for grassroots organizations turns out to be a serious challenge.

What might explain this persistent disconnect between migration and development? After all, people in Latin America increasingly recognize that migration is everywhere, remittances are widely seen as a

development resource, and those practitioners and analysts working on migration now acknowledge the need to take into account dynamics in communities of origin. Perhaps the roots go deeper and one needs to look at the basic frameworks used to define strategies for change. Even some of the most sophisticated and experienced rural development practitioners and analysts still see migration as occurring outside the framework. They treat migration as an external process happening “around” the grassroots development process, whereas for the people they are working with, migration is inside the box, a central component of a diversified family survival strategy. For most practitioners and analysts who are working on migration, in contrast, the development dimension of the relationship between receiving and sending community focuses on the “philanthropy from below” process, including the challenges of raising and sending the funds, and finding high profile, “something for everyone” projects. But who decides how to invest the funds, who ends up managing the projects, how sustainable are they? How do longer-term development impacts figure into the decision-making process? Where do the rest of the government’s social, economic and environmental policies fit in?

One indicator of the challenge of engaging the migration and development agendas involves the uneven landscapes of the relevant community-based organizations. Mexican migrants, for example, have generated a broad and diverse array of membership organizations, but they vary widely in their density and distribution. They are much more widespread in major U.S. cities than in smaller towns and rural areas, and they are most prominent and most consolidated in Los Angeles and Chicago. At the same time, the map of those Mexican migrants who are organized does not correspond directly to the map of where migrants come from more. Notably, as many as one-quarter of all Mexican hometown associations in the U.S. represent the state of Zacatecas; other states, such as Michoacan, account for a greater share of migrants to the U.S., but their migrants are less densely organized. “Mapping” of the organized world within Mexican migrant society is still in its early phases, and more work is needed to trace its contours with precision.

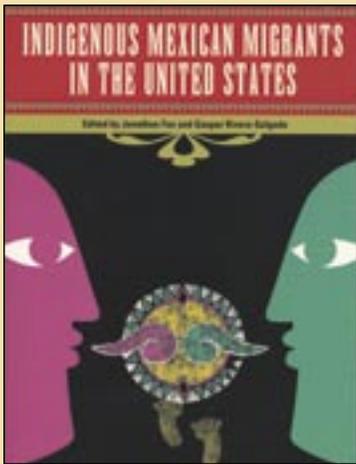
To contribute more directly to grassroots development strategies on the ground, a next stage of mapping is necessary. Perhaps at the level of a state or a region, it would be very useful to take map of those communities whose migrants have generated hometown associations and lay it over a map of those communities that have also generated the social, civic and economic development organizations that could serve as counterparts. Some “sending” communities in the state of Oaxaca have very limited economic development prospects but others have significant community-based initiatives, such as organic coffee and timber cooperatives. Indeed, several of these development initiatives, which combine a grassroots base, local accountability, broadening the impact from local to regional and environmental sustainability, received IAF support at critical moments in their early history in the 1980s and 1990s. Focusing on those organized migrants who come from hometowns with community-based economic development track records, could go a long way toward addressing the issues that make productive investments of remittances difficult. Those issues include the need for viable investment prospects, for entrepreneurial experience, for accountability to the communities of origin and for positive spillover effects beyond the immediate interested parties. But matching organized migrants to grassroots initiatives has yet to be done.

For many reasons the Inter-American Foundation is well-positioned to contribute to addressing the disconnect between migration and development. The IAF got in on the ground floor of the challenging issue of how to build cross-border development partnerships between migrants and home communities. In the 1980s, the IAF provided support to a pioneering cross-border social investment initiative, the *Cooperativa Sin Fronteras*. This co-op emerged from a farm workers’ union organizing campaign in Arizona. The union had negotiated a contract that broke new ground by requiring the company to contribute to a social investment fund benefiting the workers’ communities of origin. The co-op formed to channel these funds supported a diverse array of productive and social projects across several Mexican states and enjoyed several years of heady growth and optimism. By the early 1990s, however, it had disappeared. No doubt a serious reconstruction of its history would uncover the reasons. But according to the IAF field consultant who interviewed the founding leader just as the co-op was going under, one key issue was the imbalance between the cohesion of the organization in the U.S. and its shallow social roots in the home communities in Mexico. In his view, while in the U.S., the members shared both their workplace and their union struggle. When some returned to

Mexico to pursue productive projects, or when the co-op invested in its members’ disparate home communities, the social base and entrepreneurial experience with which to organize broad-based community development initiatives was lacking. This points to the importance of balanced cross-border partnerships.

More generally, the IAF brings at least six comparative advantages to the migration and development agenda. First is its basic philosophical premise of seeing poor people as participants in their development. This is still not a widely shared view of migrants, either in the U.S. or in Latin America. Migrants are still widely seen either as implicitly passive victims, or as massive but anonymous flows, but not as actors and certainly not as people with the capacity to organize themselves and earn a seat at the table. Second, the IAF’s rich experience has generated a special sensitivity to the often delicate and complex relationships between grassroots membership organizations and NGOs. Here again, balanced partnerships are key. Many grassroots development initiatives rise or fall on the terms of engagement between membership organizations and NGOs. Third, the IAF’s institutional legacy includes a deeply embedded awareness of the importance of synergy between broad-based social processes and good technical assistance, of how each needs to inform the other. This may seem obvious because it is so commonsensical, but some development agencies will see only technical issues, while others will focus only on the social process. Fourth, the IAF has diverse relationships with relevant social, civic and economic actors, throughout both Latin America and the U.S., who find themselves surrounded by migration processes but are just beginning to consider how to incorporate migration issues into their development strategies. Fifth, the IAF’s combination of deep local knowledge with a hemispheric perspective makes possible exchanges of experiences, across countries and sectors, that can enrich development strategies and help avoid reinventing the wheel. Last but not least, the IAF’s consistent focus on grassroots development in Latin America ensures a special sensitivity to those who stayed home, since those are who the foundation supports directly. Here again is the need for balanced partnerships. Narrowly remittance-led or exclusively migrant-led strategies will not necessarily take those back home into account, as full partners. Indeed, looking back, it turns out that the IAF has been supporting “the right to not migrate” from the beginning.

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Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States

*Edited by Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado
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*Editorial Miguel Angel Porrúa/Universidad de Zacatecas: Mexico City, 2004
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Indigenous people have migrated from Mexico to the United States for decades. In recent years, growing poverty in the Mexican countryside has increased both their numbers and their proportion in the migrant population. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado document these changing patterns in *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States* and analyze evidence of a “binational civil society” that is transforming cultural, social, and political practices across two countries.

According to the editors, the Mixtec and Zapotec peoples have notably long histories of migration to the United States, primarily to California. Newer streams representing nearly all of Mexico’s major indigenous groups now flow to Illinois, New York, Oregon, Florida and other states as well. Fox and Rivera claim these indigenous Mexicans often face discrimination on several levels: as migrants, as low-wage workers and as indigenous people, especially if they do not speak Spanish. They face barriers both within U.S. society and even among other Mexican migrants. As a result, once in the United States, many migrants who have primarily seen themselves as members of their local community begin to identify with others of their own ethnicity or simply as indigenous people.

Despite these challenges—and because of them—indigenous migrants have formed numerous organizations that are transforming their communities of origin and their new home communities in the United States. Fox and Rivera note that “social identities are created and recreated” as these migrants adapt their social, cultural and political practices to address their current needs to, for example, celebrate religious festivals, preserve traditions, exercise worker rights or negotiate remittance-funded projects with state governments in Mexico. Among the many associations founded by indigenous migrants, the binational, pan-ethnic Frente Indígena Binacional Oaxaqueño

(FIOB) stands out because of the increasing diversity of its indigenous members and because of its affiliates throughout both Mexico and the United States.

Fox and Rivera-Salgado’s book includes chapters by prominent indigenous migrant leaders, journalists and scholars documenting the challenges that indigenous migrant organizations face as they build binational political agendas. Especially important are the alternative media facilitating the exchange of ideas. These include the FIOB’s monthly newspaper and El Oaxaqueño, both circulated north and south of the border as well as Radio Bilingue, a station serving migrants in California that has added broadcasts in Mixteco as has a public radio station in Fresno. Fox and Rivera conclude that indigenous migrants are developing what the editors call “translocal community citizenship”—the ability to shape conditions and debates in Mexico and the United States through active participation in binational collective action. It also adds nuance to the ongoing debate on immigration which generally overlooks the diversity among those migrating.—
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