

Time for an Alternative Politics of Migration

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In 2019, 70,302 people from Central America, Cuba, Venezuela, and other countries requested asylum in Mexico, more than double the number of requests in 2018 and an increase of more than 5,000 percent compared with the 1,296 requests received by Mexico's Commission for Refugees in 2013. On the US side of the border, according to the Department of Homeland Security, defensive asylum applications to prevent deportation increased from 47,137 in 2014 to 159,473 in 2018, with the largest numbers filed by citizens of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (78,762) and Mexico (24,412).

This shift in the region toward forced migration instead of the well-established pattern of mostly economic, circular migration has occurred as a result of changing economic, political, and climate conditions, as well as changes in the US and Mexican migration regimes. But the root causes are not new: poverty, inequality, corruption, and the inability of governments in Mexico and Central America to provide minimal guarantees of safety and well-being for a majority of their populations. Policies such as Mexico's war on drug cartels and El Salvador's "tough hand" approach to gangs have led to pervasive insecurity and violence. Rising global temperatures have also affected the livelihoods of many people in Honduras and El Salvador who depended on harvests that are no longer viable due to drought and crop disease.

The widespread poverty, exclusion, and violence that push people to move in search of safety and the opportunity to live and work with dignity, along with the widespread backlash against their arrival, make it clear that existing frameworks have failed to effectively address the causes and effects of migration. There is a need for alternative approaches, principles, and actions—some of which are already being articulated and practiced by grassroots organizations throughout the Central America–US corridor.

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SURVIVAL ROUTES

The historical roots of the movement of people across the region are deep. In recent decades, they include US military interventions in the Central American civil wars of the 1980s, which drove many to flee north. The US deportation apparatus developed in the 1990s led to the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Central American youth, charged with felonies or minor offenses that now constituted deportable crimes. Migrants' experiences of discrimination and exclusion in the United States—due in part to the absence of integration policies—formed the conditions for their involvement in gangs. Deported gang members found themselves back in countries where civil wars, extractive industries, and foreign intervention had left weak political, economic, and judicial systems, and limited opportunities.

Meanwhile, temporary worker programs and other visa and regularization programs throughout the twentieth century facilitated strong ties among families and communities who built transnational connections and circular migration routes across Canada, the United States, Mexico, and Central America. But moving through the region to balance economic needs and family ties became increasingly challenging as a result of US border-enforcement policies since the mid-1990s—and, more recently, the stringent policies put in place by Mexico in the past five years.

Many of today's migrants were deported from the United States and are seeking to reunite with family members they left there. Others who returned to their home countries can no longer provide for families that depended on their remittances for decades. Although the governments of El Salvador and Mexico celebrate return migrants as heroes, they offer limited paths for economic opportunity and reintegration, whereas the threat of criminal organizations looms large.

The only alternative is to flee again, as Salvadoran journalist Oscar Martínez puts it. This is not a choice. It is a strategy of survival. The causes of migration are multiple and blurred because they often include different forms of violence (threats

from gangs and drug cartels, domestic and sexual abuse, and gender discrimination), the pull of family ties, and the search for economic opportunities that offer a way out of poverty and hunger.

THE MAKING OF A 'CRISIS'

The rise in migration flows from Central America, the Caribbean, Venezuela, and other countries through Mexico in the past five years has drawn attention not just because of the numbers but also due to the characteristics of the migrants—particularly the large number of unaccompanied minors. Migrants have also developed new strategies, including traveling in families or larger groups, and filing more asylum petitions.

In the last months of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, Donald Trump ratcheted up his politicization of a border “crisis” and the supposed threat of criminals entering the United States through the Mexican border. He was responding to media coverage of groups of thousands of people (the largest of them was estimated at 10,000) walking in “caravans” from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala through Mexico en route to the United States. Trump seized on this to justify his calls for emergency measures to control the border, to impose more restrictions on asylum, and to pressure Mexico to implement stricter controls on its southern and northern borders—threatening to impose tariffs or cancel the recently renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement unless it complied.

The portrayal of the “caravans” as an unprecedented “crisis” deflects responsibility for the policies that have created the conditions for such migration. It seeks to justify a continuation of the emphasis on deterrence that has been the default approach of both the US and Mexican governments for years, regardless of the parties in power. In the absence of safe and regular channels for migration, people trying to return to the United States after being deported, or migrating for the first time for reasons of survival, know that the only way to minimize the risks of the journey, avoid family separation, and improve their chances of making it past the US border is to go through the asylum system, as families or as a group.

But under the Trump administration, the US asylum system has become more difficult to access, with stricter eligibility standards, increased detention periods in subpar conditions, family

separation, and restricted opportunities to make a case in immigration courts. The costs and dangers of an attempt to reach the United States are higher—but still not enough to deter those who measure the odds against the alternative of risking their families’ lives by staying home.

Mexico has contributed to making migration more dangerous with its Programa Frontera Sur, established in 2014 to control transit migration through the country, partly in response to pressure from the Obama administration. The program purported to protect migrants’ rights through improvements in institutional infrastructure, regional collaboration and resource sharing with neighboring countries, and interagency coordination. But the reality was a dramatic expansion of security controls, checkpoints, border patrols, detentions—and more deportations than the United States has carried out since 2015.

This strategy increased the risks and violence along migration routes, compounded by rampant corruption within the Mexican National Institute for Migration and the police, and the long-standing presence of smugglers and drug cartels along migrant corridors. There has been a dramatic surge in crimes against migrants: kidnappings, extortion, sexual abuse, human trafficking, murders, and disappearances. Such perils have been known for years, drawing fresh attention after a 2010 massacre of 72 migrants in San Fernando, in the state of Tamaulipas near the Texas border. But they have become more visible as the media and civil society organizations in Mexico and Central America, including mothers of the disappeared, have attempted to hold the government accountable.

SHORT-LIVED HOPES

Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s victory in the July 2018 Mexican presidential election was a clear response by voters to the spread of violence and insecurity throughout the country. It reflected the majority’s disappointment with a series of governments that had maintained a status quo disproportionately benefiting elites. The former Mexico City mayor, a left-wing populist, inspired voters with his promises to end corruption and impunity, to offer an alternative to the use of military force against drug cartels, and to address the structural causes of poverty and inequality.

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Although migration was not a priority in his campaign platform—his agenda on this key issue was surprisingly limited, considering the heightened anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican rhetoric in the United States—López Obrador emphasized that focusing on economic development would reduce the pressures for emigration. In his first speech as president-elect, he promised, “Whoever decides to emigrate will do so as a choice and not out of necessity.”

As Trump continued to push for a border wall, López Obrador argued that Mexico’s best foreign policy move would be to focus on regional collaboration with neighbors south of its border. Olga Sánchez Cordero, his appointee for interior minister, promised that Mexico would be a country of open doors, honoring its tradition of welcoming exiles from Latin American dictatorships as well as refugees from Central America’s civil wars during the 1980s. The selection of Tonatihu Guillén, a renowned scholar, as director of the national migration agency was received as another positive signal of a holistic agenda centered on human rights, inclusion, and regional cooperation instead of control and security.

Guillén’s resignation after six months in office was an ominous sign of the gap between those principles and the reality of the new government’s enforcement actions. The combination of the furor over the migrant “caravans” and Trump’s demands soon led to a complete reversal of López Obrador’s promises, leaving migrants and the communities in which they arrive in a more precarious and dangerous situation than ever before.

A STRATEGY OF CONTROL

Mexico’s initial response to the “caravans” was to issue humanitarian visas allowing free, regularized movement through the country; promise jobs for everyone, migrants and Mexicans alike; and propose a long-term regional development plan that would reduce the pressures of emigration. The decision to allow the groups of migrants to pass through Mexico was criticized by the Trump administration as a weak policy that would create incentives for more “caravans” to come. It also drew a backlash from anti-immigrant groups in Mexico with slogans such as “Make Tijuana Great Again,” echoing the US rhetoric of criminalization and scapegoating.

López Obrador’s discourse of solidarity and brotherhood soon fizzled out as the pressure from the Trump administration increased with a de-

mand for a “safe third country” agreement that would force asylum seekers to request asylum in Mexico instead of the United States. Although Mexico pushed back, it agreed (under a threat of trade tariffs) to the Migrant Protection Protocols, commonly referred to as Remain in Mexico, which allows US authorities to send asylum seekers back to Mexico to await a court date.

To date, more than 58,000 asylum seekers (including 13,000 children) have been returned to Mexico under this agreement, and are living in precarious conditions in border towns where the threat of drug-related violence is high. They have no clarity about the length of their waiting period (estimated at up to two years) and limited access to lawyers. Since Mexico lacks resources to provide shelters or other support for asylum seekers, many live in makeshift camps with no humanitarian assistance. Confronted with these unsanitary and unsafe conditions, some families have decided to send their children on their own across the US border, or have given up on their cases.

Along the southern border, the Mexican government has deployed the recently created National Guard, a police force with no training for handling migration, to control the northward flows of people. Thousands of migrants are being held in crowded, unsanitary detention centers or stranded in shelters and informal camps in the border state of Chiapas, one of the poorest in the country. With no hope in the backlogged and abysmally underfunded Mexican asylum system, their only certainty is that returning to their places of origin is not an option. Many have died in attempts to find alternative routes north, and others have resorted to precarious labor, including low-wage jobs on coffee plantations or sex work.

While publicly rejecting Trump’s demand that Mexico pay for a border wall, López Obrador has continued and even increased his predecessor Enrique Peña Nieto’s concentration of resources on preventing people from moving north. Instead of addressing the structural causes of emigration, Mexico has fallen into the same logic of enforcement that has proved deadly and ineffective in the United States and other parts of the world: attempting to create deterrence by increasing the risks of migration.

Meanwhile, the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have set aside the goals of regional cooperation and development. Under US pressure, all three signed “safe third country” agreements in exchange for various inducements:

the possibility of extending temporary worker programs for Guatemala and temporary protected status for Salvadorans, as well as a resumption of foreign aid that had been halted earlier in the year. This is a policy likely to result in even more dangerous conditions than those now faced by asylum seekers in Mexico.

OTHER APPROACHES

Since the responses to migration by governments in the region have been not only insufficient but also harmful, grassroots organizations have filled the gap and mobilized resources to create new models of support for migrants and refugees, as well as the communities they settle in. Innovative and transformative examples include a network of migrant shelters across Central America and Mexico, deportee/returnee organizations in Mexico, and sanctuary coalitions in the United States.

Civil society groups are working to build coalitions of local communities and organizations across borders, and advocating for approaches that demonstrate the connections between the hardships faced by migrants and other forms of discrimination and exclusion based on gender, race, or indigeneity. This work goes beyond urgent responses to “migrant crises.” These groups are concerned with broader questions of equality and justice, recognizing that the conditions that push migrants to leave their homes in El Salvador or Haiti are often also present in the communities where they arrive, and not only in Mexico. Migrants also encounter some of these structural forms of discrimination and exclusion in the United States.

The alternative politics of migration that civil society groups are pushing for is not just about long-overdue changes in laws, policies, and institutions. They seek to address the conditions of poverty, inequality, and violence that affect both migrants and their host communities. As anti-migrant sentiment begins to emerge more openly in Mexico, the government should return its focus to creating economic opportunity and guaranteeing the right to migrate. Investing in infrastructure to help migrants gain access to work—and also to housing, education, health care, and mental health services—can benefit both migrants and Mexicans.

Some of these initiatives have been focused on the *maquiladora* sector—the factories in Mexican border cities, where there is labor scarcity and growing interest in incorporating migrants into the local workforce, but also a history of unsafe and exploitative labor conditions. Increasing mi-

gration has drawn renewed attention to issues such as informal employment, low wages, and barriers to access to public health and education. Exploitation, discrimination, and inadequate infrastructure affect migrants and locals alike.

On the US side, the August 2019 massacre of 22 people at a Walmart store in El Paso, Texas, laid bare the consequences of the anti-Mexican, anti-Latino rhetoric ascendant in the past few years. But Trump’s xenophobic outbursts and policies have forced activists, lawyers, and governments to react with urgent countermeasures, leaving little time and few resources for pursuing longer-term strategies of inclusion, equity, and justice—or policies that address the concerns of both migrants and the communities in which they settle.

Central America and Mexico need to strengthen their justice systems to reduce the endemic crime that drives migration. There is also a need for sustainable development programs, which should be led by local communities to avoid repeating the problems of previous initiatives that benefited corporate interests at the expense of community and environmental priorities.

Immigration reform proposals should reflect a regional perspective. They could include providing temporary work and humanitarian visas, regularizing undocumented migration and expanding channels for legal migration, preventing family separation, and sharing resources to support organizations and legal aid groups that offer information, assistance, and shelter to migrants. Redirecting resources from detention, deportation, and border control to such measures would reduce the pressure on borders and, most importantly, create safer and more humane conditions.

The desire for an alternative migration framework grounded in principles of dignity and justice has been expressed by the Mexicans who voted for a political transformation, by the individuals, families, and groups migrating in search of a better life, and by the volunteers who offer shelter, food, and community to migrants moving through Central America, Mexico, the United States, and Canada. Their vision of solidarity and mutuality sees in migration an opportunity to address the conditions of inequality and exclusion within economic and political systems that affect us all. The hope for an alternative can only come from the efforts of those who believe that a different system is necessary and possible, those who are already building it, and those who are willing to join them. ■