CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION IN NORTH AMERICA: BETWEEN TRANSIT AND SETTLEMENT

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Migration of Central Americans to Mexico and the U.S. has gained prominence in public opinion and policy debates over the last decades in North America. In this short article, we summarize the key findings of a research project (CANAMID) focusing on migrant conditions at origin (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador), in transit, at destination (Mexico and U.S.), and return, all characterizing the main trends in Central American migration in North America with the aim to inform future research and policy agendas on this critical challenge for the region. We provide an outlook of demographic trends, violence and impunity in transit, lack of consular protection, labour market incorporation in Mexico and the U.S., health challenges in Mexico, as well as access to school and educational gaps of their children in the U.S. and Mexico.

La migración de centroamericanos a México y EUA se ha vuelto prominente en la opinión pública, así como en los debates sobre política pública, durante las últimas décadas en América del Norte. En este corto artículo resumimos los hallazgos clave de un proyecto de investigación (CANAMID) que se centra en las condiciones del migrante en su lugar de origen (Guatemala, Honduras y el Salvador), en tránsito, en el destino (México y EUA), y en el retorno, como caracterización de las principales tendencias de la migración centroamericana en América del Norte, con el propósito de dar forma a las agendas de investigación futura y de política pública en torno a este desafío crítico para la región. Ofrecemos un panorama de las tendencias demográficas, de la violencia y la impunidad presentes en el tránsito, la ausencia de protección consular, la incorporación al mercado de trabajo en México y EUA, los retos a la salud en México, así como acceso a la escuela y las brechas educativas para sus hijos tanto en Estados Unidos como en México.

La migration des Centraméricains vers le Mexique et les États-Unis a pris de l'importance dans les débats sur l'opinion publique et les politiques au cours des dernières décennies en Amérique du Nord. Dans ce court article, nous résumons les principales conclusions d'un projet de recherche (CANAMID) axé sur les conditions d'origine des migrants (Guatemala, Honduras et Salvador), en transit, à destination (Mexique et États-Unis) et sur le retour, les tendances de la migration en Amérique centrale en Amérique du Nord dans le but d'informer les futurs programmes de recherche et de politique sur ce défi crucial pour la région. Nous fournissons des perspectives sur les tendances démographiques, la violence et l'impunité en transit, l'absence de protection consulaire, l'insertion sur le marché du travail au Mexique et aux États-Unis, les défis en matière de santé au Mexique, ainsi que l'accès à l'école et les lacunes scolaires de leurs enfants aux États-Unis et au Mexique.

The phenomenon of Central American migration has become highly prominent over the last decade in North American politics and social opinion. New flows of Central American migrants fleeing violence, prosecution and economic and political turmoil in their countries of origin have prompted a rise of undocumented migration through Mexico to the U.S. This has coincided with a period when net flows of undocumented Mexican migrants to the U.S. became negative for the first time in history. Although public debate over Central American migration is dominated by the widespread image of vulnerable undocumented migrants travelling to the southern border of the U.S. on top of freight trains through Mexico, this is actually a much more complex phenomenon. Central American migration is comprised of multiple migration flows, population collectives, travel methods and migration practices involving internal displacement within Central America, transit to the U.S., human trafficking, settlement in Mexico and in the U.S, family reunification, circularity and return. This last phase is a consequence of deportation or other reasons that lead to a failure of the migration attempt, and that sometimes produce situations of "permanent transit" where migrants get stuck in legal and geographical limbo for years. These circumstances characterizing Central American migration over the last decade challenge traditional notions of clean-cut origin-transit-destination distinctions in migration studies and in public policy making, and thus require innovative approaches in its analysis.

Within this framework, the authors coordinated a research project titled *Central America-North America Migration Dialogue* (CANAMID), a dialogue between academia, NGOs and policy makers aiming to generate updated and useful evidence to support new public policies tackling the main issues involving Central American migration to Mexico and the U.S. It focused on Central American migrants as a dynamic collective across five countries: Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico and the U.S. Canada was not part of this initial project due to the small volume of inflows in 2013 when it was conceived, although there are important implications for the whole of North America, as we will discuss here.

CANAMID focus is on migrant conditions at origin (the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America), transit, destination (Mexico and U.S.), and return. The project was funded by the MacArthur Foundation (2014-2017). Its main deliverable is a publication series consisting of 14 policy briefs (Mateos and Escobar 2017) published in English and Spanish by academic experts in each of the topics, who were each commissioned to tackle specific aspects of this phenomenon; demographic trends, lack of a Welfare State at the origin countries, violence and impunity in transit migration through Mexico, lack of consular protection, minors arriving at the U.S. border, labour market incorporation in Mexico and the U.S., health challenges of Central American immigrants in Mexico and deportees in Central America, as well as access to school and educational gaps of their children in the U.S. and Mexico.

In this brief essay we summarize some of CANAMID's key findings that together characterize the main trends in Central American migration in North America, with the aim to inform future research and policy agendas on this critical challenge for the region. We organize this synthetic outlook in three parts and collectives, tackling 1) transit migrants, 2) settlement in the U.S. and Mexico and 3) conditions at origin and returnees.

Transit migration of Central Americans through Mexico more than tripled from 126,000 after events in 2011 to a peak of 392,000 in 2014 and 377,000 in 2015, reaching its former peak of 2005 (Rodriguez, E. 2015). Ernesto Rodriguez, in Policy Brief 14, developed a complex model to estimate the volume of Central American transit migration flows using deportation data from Mexico and the U.S. as well as data on U.S. residents from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS). He demonstrates that regardless of increased efforts to deport more migrants on behalf of both Mexican and U.S. migration authorities, variations in the net sum of the irregular migration flow is driven primarily by origin "push" factors, and not necessarily deterrent policies in transit and destination. What these efforts have produced is actually making the irregular crossing more dangerous and more expensive. As a consequence of harsher migration controls inland in Mexico, migratory routes have been pushed to less populated areas controlled by organized crime and drug

cartels, who have gained and now profit from the human trafficking of Central American migrants. As a consequence, reports of abuse to migrants' human rights have skyrocketed over the last decade. Hipólito Rodriguez (2016) disentangles the different factors behind the omnipresent corruption practices amongst government officials and security forces, producing the rampant impunity with which drug cartels operate in the Gulf of Mexico region and generating more violence towards transit migrants. The stories of kidnappings, rapes, murders, and other violent events sadly emanate from all authors' testimonies in the CANAMID series as they interviewed key respondents or conducted fieldwork in the region.

The response to this challenge from civil society organisations in Mexico has been exemplary, not only in terms of their direct humanitarian response through migrant shelters and legal assistance but also in generating spaces for debate from which concrete policy proposals were developed and implemented. Leticia Calderón (2016) demonstrated the leading role of NGOs in driving forward the policy agenda and pushing for substantial reforms to immigration law that took a major shift in the 2010-2014 period oriented towards the protection of transit migrants.

One of these legislative changes consisted for example in granting transit migrants access to free health treatment for 90 days. However, according to Rene Leyva and colleagues (2015), this benefit has been largely ignored on the ground and a lack of effective access to healthcare in government facilities is the norm. As a result, Leyva et al. (2016) find, the main burden of attending physical and mental health problems relies primarily on the work of shelter houses run by volunteer groups across Mexico.

CANAMID authors proposed that the re-definition of the concept of transit migration should be re-thought since there is growing evidence of transit trips becoming much longer, migrants being trapped along Mexico because of health issues, kidnappings, family reunification, couple formation, asylum filing, a host of factors that produce lives in continuous transit, circular movement along migratory routes within Mexico or with Central America, and situations of an "on-hold transit." Fernandez and Rodriguez (2016) interviewed Honduran families in Chiapas and Veracruz who considered themselves "in transit" despite the fact that they have been living in Mexico for over seven years. These situations of Central American migrants trapped in a sort of "eternal transit" requires further analysis within a framework that considers Mexico a settlement country and North America-Central America as a dynamic migration corridor that should be taken as a whole, as the CANAMID project does.

Jorge Schiavon (2015) concludes that despite recent efforts to enhance the capacity of Central American countries to be able to provide more consistent consular support to their nationals abroad, there is a general lack of institutional resources to properly attend to the critical situation of their citizens in the U.S. and Mexico. Furthermore, there is a general lack of coordination between Mexico and the three Central American countries in matters beyond migration issues, such as for example labour and social security, health, judicial coordination and so on. Several authors make the recommendation to Mexican authorities to develop a more proactive role to bridge this gap.

While Mexico is increasingly becoming a country of immigration, and Central Americans born in Guatemala is the second largest group of foreign born after the U.S., the figures of Central American-born permanent residents in Mexico are still extremely small for a country with a population of 120 million. There are only 68,000 people born in the Northern Triangle of Central America living in Mexico (Aguilar and Giorguli 2016), while in the U.S. this figure is 3 million people (Pederzini et al. 2015). Moreover, most of this settled migrant population is comprised of Guatemalans living in the state of Chiapas, which together with the daily transborder commuters comprise the bulk of Central American workers in Mexico. Liliana Meza (2015, 2016) analyzed the situation of Central American workers in Mexico, revealing distinct occupational patterns that vary by nationality, gender and geography. She recommends extending temporary work permits to Hondurans and Salvadoreans and beyond the border states of Chiapas and Campeche.

Other Policy Briefs compare the diverse outlook of Central American workers in the U.S. (Orrenius and Zabodny 2015), and the educational outcomes of children of Central American migrants in the U.S. (Jensen and Bachmeier 2015) and Mexico (Aguilar and Giorguli 2016). They conclude that Temporary Protection Status (TPS), and documented status in the U.S. provides better jobs, better pay and better educational outcomes for their children. However, children born to Central American-born parents tend to fare worst in school in both the U.S. and Mexico than their peers born to native-born parents.

In the rest of the policy briefs, Roldan and Hernandez (2015), Bojorquez (2015) and Pederzini et al. (2015), investigate how political, historic and socioeconomic conditions in origin countries in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have shaped a vicious cycle of violence and instability that pushes new migration cycles. Over the last three decades, eternal political instability, militarisation, racism and corruption has perpetuated stark economic disparities, poverty and gang violence even after the peace agreements in the 1990s. Mass deportations by the U.S. of gang members, which became more violent while in U.S. prisons in California, have perpetuated a vicious cycle that reproduces violence and crime from U.S. prisons to Central American barrios, which in turn pushes more people to leave for the U.S. pressed by violence, kidnappings, extorsion or mandatory youth recruitment by gangs. Not all deportees of course are gang members or violent people, but Bojorquez (2015) brings up the issue of how more

serious mental health problems arise after deportation since broken families, and whole lives in the U.S. are put to an end overnight and deportees are forced to live in countries they do not understand.

Given the complex portrait presented in CANAMID's policy briefs, Mexico and U.S.' apparent ignorance of the factors driving emigration at the Central American countries of origin is striking. The U.S. reacted with a Peace and Prosperity Pact in 2014, after thousands of unaccompanied children "showed up" at the U.S. southern border. The plan promised new international aid for development projects to prevent emigration, but ended up beefing up the security budgets of Central American countries and Mexico's border patrol.

To conclude, the evidence gathered through the fourteen CANAMID policy briefs points at the urgent need for nuanced understandings of the complex phenomenon of Central American migration to North America. As such, it should be understood as a whole collective of migrants born or with direct family links in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador and moving along or settling in the five countries involved, as a fluid continuum of people and places and not as disconnected silos. Previous or persisting attempts to conceive this collective as isolated national-populations in transit through Mexico to the U.S. are extremely restricted and fail to represent the reality of a dynamic collective moving along the Central American-North American region, increasingly settling in Mexico, and which present enormous contrasts and subtleties that need to be properly understood. Only a true North American approach to migration policy, as other authors propose in this special issue, will succeed in improving the life chances of the Central American migrant population and facilitate its integration in their communities of settlement.

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