

# THE ROUTES OF CENTRAL AMERICANS THROUGH MEXICO: CHARACTERIZATION, PRINCIPAL AGENTS Y COMPLEXITIES

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## INTRODUCTION

It has been pointed out in recent years that the migration flow of Central Americans passing through Mexico en route to the United States has maintained constant growth and, furthermore, that the percentage of women, adolescents and children is steadily increasing. Despite various measures taken by the authorities in attempts to control it, Central American transmigration continues to increase even though circumstantially affected by hurricanes and other climate disasters which, since 2005, have damaged public transportation networks, especially in certain strategic places in the Mexican southeast.

While the usual shortages and limitations of the Central American socio-economic frameworks continue to encourage emigration and the sending of remittances from the United States, crossing Mexico becomes more and more important for transmigrants, for the limited social circles that support them, for the growing criminal organizations that profit from them, for banks and their broader network of financial services as well as for the inconsistent public entities who try to make international migration conform to the corresponding legal regulations. Considerations of national security, combating drug trafficking and human trafficking and, to a lesser degree, encouraging trade with the Central American isthmus and the regulation of a regional labor market of southern Mexico with Guatemala and Belize are all part of the current migration spectrum. This set of diverse interests, participations and expectations demonstrate the

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concurrent and simultaneous existence of social processes and different institutions for which there are no clear answers nor defined response times. What happens in the future will have to take into consideration this diversity of events in the Mexican transit space and, in particular, along the migration routes that link southern illusions with northern realities.<sup>2</sup> This article tells of the main agents, adventures, solidarities, dramas, and abuses of this journey.

### WHY THE ROUTES MULTIPLY

There is no sure way of demonstrating statistically that the Central American transmigrant flow has increased and continues to do so; nor is there any way of showing that it has decreased. There are only estimates, often the product of the relative values of diverse institutional and social agents, conditioned by the place, participation, perspective and access to specific expressions, direct or otherwise, of the migration flows under observation. The main reason for this is that almost all Central American transmigrants who travel through Mexico do so without a visa, and are thus undocumented. Therefore there are only indirect opinions and deductions on the part of civil organizations and official institutions, such as the data produced by the National Institute of Immigration (INM). The most quoted source refers to total detentions (or apprehensions, in the official jargon), with the following characteristics:

TABLE 1  
Apprehensions of undocumented foreigners in Mexico  
by nationality, Instituto Nacional de Migración, 2001-2005

YEAR	GUATEMALAN		HONDURAN		SALVADORIAN		NICARAGUAN		OTHERS		TOTAL	
	TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%	TOTAL	%
2001	67,522	44.9	40,105	26.6	35,007	23.3	1,582	1.1	7,896	4.1	152,412	100.0
2002	67,336	48.8	41,801	30.3	20,800	15.1	1,609	1.2	6,515	4.6	138,061	100.0
2003	86,023	45.9	61,900	33.0	29,301	15.6	2,150	1.1	8,240	4.4	187,614	100.0
2004	94,404	43.8	72,684	33.7	34,572	16.0	2,453	1.1	11,582	5.4	215,695	100.0
2005	100,948	41.0	78,326	33.0	42,674	18.0	3,980	2.0	14,341	6.0	240,269	100.0
2006	84,523	46.3	58,001	31.7	27,287	14.9	3,590	2.0	1,104	0.6	182,705	100.0
2007*	14,530	29.7	22,458	45.9	5,632	11.5	818	1.7	739	1.5	48,957	100.0

\*Preliminary data, November 2007. INM.  
Source: *Datos estadísticos migratorios de México*. Instituto Nacional de Migración.

The principal nationalities of undocumented foreigners detained by the INM are Guatemalan, Honduran, Salvadorian and Nicaraguan, in descending order;

<sup>2</sup> A research project entitled *Presente y futuro de los transmigrantes centroamericanos en México* ("The Present and Future of Central American Transmigrants in Mexico") was carried out by this author with the support of Segob-Conacyt funding, from August 2005 to December 2006. Some of the research findings are presented here as they were observed in the field during the aforementioned period and analyzed in the light of the transmigratory process occurring in this country.



this current tendency has been constant since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In fact, since the 1990s, when Mexican authorities increased their undocumented migration control efforts, the tendency has remained unchanged, as shown in the following table:

TABLE 2  
Expulsions of foreigners from Mexico and denied entries by nationality,  
Instituto Nacional de Migración, 1990-2000

YEAR	NATIONALITY						TOTAL ABSOLUTOS
	GUATEMALAN	SALVADORIAN	HONDURAN	NICARAGUAN	OTHERS	TOTAL %	
1990	46.5	36.1	11.8	2.4	3.2	100	126,440
1991	52.5	30.3	13.8	0.9	2.4	100	133,342
1992	53.1	21.7	20.8	1.4	3.1	100	123,046
1993	48.3	23.5	21.9	2.8	3.5	100	122,005
1994	38.0	20.2	28.7	10.9	2.3	100	113,115
1995	49.1	18.4	25.7	2.4	4.3	100	105,940
1996	47.1	19.5	29.0	1.8	2.6	100	107,118
1997	44.2	22.0	29.1	1.4	3.3	100	85,588
1998	41.3	23.1	31.5	1.7	2.4	100	111,572
1999	40.3	20.7	25.4	1.1	2.5	100	126,498
2000	45.9	21.7	26.5	1.1	4.8	100	172,935
Total	46.2	23.6	24.6	2.5	3.2	100	1'327,599

Source: *Datos estadísticos migratorios de México*. Instituto Nacional de Migración.

Central American transmigration towards the US has a long history, as does traveling through Mexico. There was a time, not very long ago (up until the 1980s) when the US and Mexican governments paid little attention to this migration. There were reasons for that. The small number of Central Americans entering their territory was not a problem for the US. Then, when the flow began to increase, it was tolerated due to the politico-military conflicts devastating the major migrant-exporting countries of the isthmus and due to the interest in not making the job of the weak Central American governments at that time any more difficult, governments who made a common front the US in what was considered the global East-West conflagration. The scenario began to change in the 1980s with the subsequent peace agreements in the region. The US began to introduce more requirements for visas as well as new border controls by the mid 1980s, especially along the southern border. During the 1990s, and with the fall of the Berlin Wall, this southern border would see growing security and control measures being established, combining physical impediments (walls in strategic places),<sup>3</sup> subjective impediments (more Border Patrol staff, now part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)), sophisticated equipment and technology.

<sup>3</sup> The United States began a new containment strategy in the 90s that would go on throughout the decade with the following measures: 1991 and 1993 fences were erected in California, in the



These new times had other priorities and a series of border control programs began which continues to this day.<sup>4</sup>

The situation is different for Mexico with its various complications. By itself, Central American transmigration is not, and never has been, a problem for Mexico. It is not a problem from the moment that transmigrants buy goods (food and medicine, for example), and hire services (transport and accommodation, etc.), boosting commercial activity in the different areas they pass through, with the briefest possible of stays. However, transmigration began to become a problem when the US modified its migration policy towards Central America, creating a new cycle of deportations to the south (directly affecting Mexico, due to the volume of people involved), and at the same time a demand for greater control on the part of Mexico of its southern border. In this context, Mexico founded a new immigration and transmigration policy in the 1990s that aims to control the south-north flows. Mexico arrived at the end of the 20th century with a significant part of its migration administration structure and staff oriented towards keeping Central American transmigration, and undocumented migration in general that comes through the southern border, as close to that border as possible. The creation of the National Migration Institute (INM) at the beginning of the 1990s is the material and symbolic proof of this new era in Mexican migration policy, some of the main features of which are analyzed here.

Faced with state attack, Central American transmigration through Mexico reacted: diverse routes and dynamics were established, first with little pressure, later with more pressure, and finally, with ever greater, growing risks. But they keep crossing. Faced with the accumulation of legal and administrative obstacles in terms of obtaining visas, various openings emerged together with the rapid generation of social, humanitarian and trafficking processes which would channel, support, or profit from the international undocumented flow. This is the only way to explain the multiplication of agents along migration routes, product of that long migration process and the legal fences that have tried to contain it.

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area adjacent to Tijuana; operations Blockade and Hold the Line came into force in 1993; Operation Gatekeeper in 1994; Operation Safeguard in 1995; the current migration legislation, known as IIRIRA, was passed in 1996, and Operation Río Grande was introduced in 1997.

<sup>4</sup> The attacks of September 11th led the American government to apply new institutional engineering, aiming to improve internal security capacity (180,000 government employees from 22 agencies, DHS), as well as promoting and putting into practice a new legal framework that includes the following measures: The Patriot Act, 2001, which triples migration inspection, customs and border patrol staff along the Mexican border, increases the budget for technology and reinforces regulations for preventing the entry of possible terrorists; Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform (EBSVERA), 2002; National Security Entry, Exit, and Registration System (NSEERS), 2002; US-Visit, 2003 (Visitor & Immigrant Status Indicator Technology); SEVIS, 2003 (Student & Exchange Visitor Information System); the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America, March, 2005 (SPP), between Canada, the US and Mexico; the US-Mexico bilateral program Operation Against Smugglers and Traffickers Initiative on Safety and Security (OASSIS), August, 2005; Secure Border Initiative (SBI), November, 2005, a new level of priority in combating undocumented migration; and The National Security Strategy of the USA, March 2006.



The creativity of migrants and social networks involved in places of origin, transit and destination has never been exclusively targeted to pointing out a destination, however imprecise that may be in North America (“I’m going to California”, without knowing in which part of California a friend or contact happens to be), but rather also targets specific ways of migrating and the necessary adaptations along the way in order to reach the required goal. Migrating without documents is a constant challenge to the creativity of those for whom it is a daily survival strategy. One expression of this creativity is the diversity of routes and the way in which they are used even on the same day by a different group of migrants. In spite of being essentially the same, each wave of migrants chains the ways of crossing in a different order. Thus, we can say generically that the routes are by air, sea and land. Land route travel can be subdivided into rail, on foot, passenger and freight buses, and private cars.<sup>5</sup> The greatest diversification of points of entry and transit, consequently, responds to the different strategies and moments of transmigration.<sup>6</sup>

Central American migrant flow in particular enters Mexico via countless local tracks located in Chiapas and Tabasco. As for Mexico’s northern border, those routes close to the Atlantic and Mexico Gulf coasts continue to predominate, however, routes that do not pass through California and Texas are beginning to take on more significance, as a result of US border control policy. The effects on the fluctuation of the migration wave of the habilitation of new detainment centers and containment operatives are undeniable. Records from northern police stations that formerly gave the (erroneous) impression that the detainments occurred there are now drafted in such a way as to reflect the administrative sites where detainments actually take place. Additionally, it is now possible to see the immediate implications on transmigration flows of governmental action and the response, once that flow becomes familiar with governmental innovation and generates new ways of evasion. Thus we can speak of migration movement fluctuation.

The last decade of the 20th Century saw the establishment of centers known as migration stations, places whose exclusive purpose is the confinement of undocumented foreigners awaiting repatriation. By the year 2000, there was a Migration Station in Mexico City and 24 detention facilities (one in Chihuahua, one in Sinaloa, two in Tamaulipas, and the remaining 20 in Guerrero, Oaxaca, Tabasco, Chiapas and Veracruz). The greatest number of facilities in the South-Southeast demonstrates the aim of containing undocumented transmigration mainly along

<sup>5</sup> The alterations to routes and means of transport that came about as a result of climate disasters give rise to the increased use of public and private transport, as confirmed in the field.

<sup>6</sup> For a visual image (including 16 maps) of the transmigration process across Mexico, see *Una vida discreta, fugaz y anónima. Los centroamericanos transmigrantes en México* (“A discreet, fleeting and anonymous life. Central American transmigrants in Mexico”) by Casillas, published in 2007 by the Mexican National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) and the International Organization for Migration.



the border with Guatemala, and with Belize, which presents a lesser volume of international migrants. By 2005 there were 52 migration stations (with new names, classification, material and technical resources, and staff, among other things), the majority located in the states of the South-Southeast, especially in Chiapas where there are 15,<sup>7</sup> along the same general transmigration containment lines. In other words, the aim of containing undocumented transmigration remains constant and the measures observed respond to a strengthening of that purpose, with gradual improvements in the systems of records, detention, presentation and returning of undocumented migrants. There have been changes in procedures but not in how Mexican migration policy is conceived. By 2007 the number of migration stations was reduced from 52 to 48, mainly due to the fact that the facilities did not cover the minimum requirements necessary for functioning, and were cause for public criticism and observations from the National Human Rights Commission.<sup>8</sup> Their distribution throughout the country demonstrates the undeniable intention of containing undocumented migrants. The migration stations are mainly situated in cities with connections to main transport networks and strategic points entering by sea and air in the South and center of the country, as well as important cities in the North or US border crossing points, which constitute a type of vertical migration border across the country, which impacts communication channels close to the coasts.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the measures taken, the transmigratory flow was not contained, although its extent cannot be specified. There was a *diversification* in terms of the locations of apprehensions, and not necessarily a significant retention, in spite of the increased national total of apprehensions in 2005 (240,269); the subsequent drop in total apprehensions for 2006 (182,705) and 2007 (43,780 up to September) corresponds to a *transitory downward trend* in the flow, due to the aforementioned climate disasters at the end of 2005 and successive years (some of which also affected the Central American countries), which also impeded the migration authorities' labor, given the consequent modification of the routes of migra-

<sup>7</sup> The migration stations are located in El Manguito, Huehuetán, Hueyate, Echegaray, Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, Playas de Catazajá, Mazapa de Madero, Talismán, Frontera Corozal, San Gregorio Chamich, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Comitán, Palenque, San Cristóbal de las Casas and Tapachula.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the National Human Rights Commission Special Report on the human rights situation in migration stations and places authorized by the National Migration Institute in the Mexican Republic (*Situación de los Derechos Humanos en las Estaciones Migratorias y Lugares Habilitados del Instituto Nacional de Migración en la República Mexicana*), dated 01/09/06. For various reasons, the 48 existing stations continue to be the object of founded criticism, without any qualitative substantive changes being made improving the confinement, access or process conditions occurring therein.

<sup>9</sup> At the time of final corrections (June 2008), it is known extra officially that there will be substantive modifications in INM activities on Mexico's southern border, including the construction of (five or six) more migration stations and the eventual remodeling of some of those already existing. The Mexican migration authorities, moreover, have high expectations of receiving significant resources for the Merida Initiative, on the assumption that these will go towards fighting human traffic; at the time of going to press, the terms and amounts of the aforementioned Initiative have not been made public, hence it is not possible to give an opinion in any greater detail.



tion, the rapid adaptation of the trafficking networks and the generation of new ones that saw an opportunity in the disasters to broaden the services they offer, with the immediate increase in costs, etc., but not due to an effective action on the part of the migration authority.<sup>10</sup>

### FUNCTIONAL DISTINCTIONS AMONG ROUTES

The conjugation of administrative means of containment and detention, natural disasters, dynamism of the trafficking networks and the ups and downs in social assistance motivated transmigrants to seek new ways of access to the North. Functional distinctions can be made between routes, which can be principal and secondary, according to the criteria followed: long or short; safe; economical; alternative; or a combination. According to the circumstances, a route can have a main stretch, but not all of it can be. The obstacles faced by the transmigrant determine the selectivity applied. It may be that a particular route is principal in a given moment and secondary in another. Again, it depends on what happens along the way: new migration controls, the presence of criminal networks, finding a more convenient route, etc. Being principal or secondary is a connotation that is related to diverse elements that the migrants and their support or trafficking networks come to know and share with the waves of migrants that follow them.

The routes are considered autonomous when they serve only the migration flow and are considered shared when they are also used for other purposes (for example, drug trafficking). The means of communication (roads and railways) are still used for the public purposes that gave rise to them. The difference now is that transmigrants give it a second use, in agreement with their aim. Thus, in accordance with their particular conception of risk, some opt for the most transited routes and others for the least. Some think that they will find the porosity to ease transit in social mass; others think that it is easier to detect and evade migration control or governmental authorities along deserted routes, as the long arm of authority barely covers main arteries and (very occasionally) the secondary ones. Therefore, there are those who consider a route as principal and at the same time, others consider it secondary. Some may consider routes to be autonomous, not because they are, but because they are unaware of the activity of

<sup>10</sup> 2005 was a year of political-electoral effervescence in which various changes took place in terms of the heads of the Vice Ministry of Population, Migration and Religious Affairs, the INM, and positions in other government departments that depend on the INM, in offices such as the Coordination of Delegates and the post of Regional Delegate in Chiapas and Veracruz, among others. As a result of so many changes, it would have been difficult to implement successful measures with continuity, while there was some much employment uncertainty among the governmental migration area middle-management and permanent staff. In 2006, changes in the Secretariat of the Interior and other departments came with the start of a new federal administration which did not assist with the generation of successful new policies but rather let to the installation of and learning on the part of new staff in the area.



other networks who use them for trafficking people, goods or other objects. This differentiation helps to understand why some flows go one way, are diverted, and later return to the original route. *The sinuosity of the flows is more to do with the logic of their perceptions than the undulations of the roads and railways used.*

Transmigrants do not make their own roads; they make existing ones their own. They need no permit to use them. They practice free transit although they have to pay rights of way to criminals and abusive officials. They have done this since long-ago. Migration controls are obstacles, not necessarily impediments. When an authority asks them for their migration permit they find a way around it or of obtaining (or acquiring, often by petition) the good will of the public agent for clearing the way. Very rarely they resort to violence in order to continue forward. As one Salvadorian transmigrant put it, they are more afraid of hunger than death, which is why there is no stopping them. And if they are stopped, they reoffend. If death catches up with them, only they die. Hunger, on the other hand, can destroy the entire family. Thus, they say that famine is to be feared more than “the bony one” (*la huesuda*), that is, death. Migration northwards is learned from childhood and over generations. Transmigrants learn how to overcome the difficulties of the voyage at home by listening to the experiences of previous generations, from experiences at home and from their own experiences of emigration. Emigration is a way of overcoming hunger, a way of life.

Overland routes are those most used and among them, travelling by train has recently become the most frequently used option. The freight train is the quintessential transmigrant rail option. On the whole, those who travel this way are those with least resources, although as they travel as stowaways, they have to pay officials who profit from the undocumented, or private security guards and paid train workers, so they can get on the train, not be ejected, be let off before a checkpoint, and be assured the train will not slow down before migration control, etc. The journey, thus, has an economic cost and sometimes a corporal one for Central American transmigrants (especially for women).

The overland routes of Central American transmigrants in Mexico are narrow in the southeast, mainly due to the layout of Mexican territory. The routes tend to diversify as the central areas are reached. This is mainly due to the road and rail infrastructure. It is important to point out that the transmigrant population makes use of the existing means of transit across the country en route to the United States, that is, there is no need to create new routes or means of communication other than those that already exist.

Drawing closer to the southeast region of the country allows us to observe the entry routes and the main and secondary routes. Of course, these routes are fed, especially in the states of Chiapas and Tabasco, by numerous local tracks that lead to Tapachula, Palenque, Arriaga and Tenosique. Some parts of Tabasco in the vicinity of the border are difficult to control and are in general high risk locations due to the routes used by drug trafficking and flooding in the area,





which leads to competition in terms of use of the few routes available, usually at the expense of those who have least protection, that is, the undocumented. Other public roads between Chiapas and Tabasco have better connections with the central regions and thus expedite the undocumented journey. Due to the disappearance of the Tapachula train station in 2005, transmigrants have circumstantially had to go further north in Chiapas, as far as Arriaga, a journey that takes a week on foot and which exposes them to the criminal networks that have settled between Pijijiapan and Arriaga. Rather than going further into Chiapanecan territory, some prefer to turn towards Tabasco via Palenque in order to avoid the risks, or go directly by way of Tenosique, which is no guarantee of immunity but rather, some consider, a lesser risk.

Some places are considered platforms, some are junctions, and others are passing points. Airports in particular follow a different logic given the greater controls there, which make their use en masse more difficult and more expensive:

- Platforms: Concentration zones where migrant groups arrive, regroup, take shelter and leave;
- Junctions or nodes: Places that provide alternative routes and from where migrants are redirected; and
- Passing points: Places where migrants pass through without stopping, or stop briefly.

On their journey, transmigrants can find:

1. Support houses, with individuals and social networks that provide information, food, accommodation, health services, bathing facilities, legal help, etc. These humanitarian shelters are sometimes used by trafficking networks, which put their *pollos* (“chickens”, i.e. their charges) out of the way or seek to recruit others inside the houses. These houses are also frequently infiltrated by various municipal, state or federal agents. This occurs counter to the will and vigilance of those responsible for the house who, apart from their genuine humanitarian efforts, have to live with the stress of harassment;<sup>11</sup>
2. Safe houses (for criminal networks), which are hard for the social analyst to locate and which bring predictable consequences for personal safety if pointed out. There is evidence to suggest that some hotels are used for this purpose, in the South-Southeast, center-north and in the northern Mexico border regions, as well as houses found in strategic points along the main transmigration routes; and,

<sup>11</sup> Different organizations that provide direct attention to Central Americans have been found on the routes. According to the register of a network of Civil Society Organizations, human rights centers, shelter and houses linked to migration in Mexico (the *Foro Migraciones*, the “Migration Forum”), only some of the organizations provide direct attention to Central American transmigrants, some have since disappeared, as occurred in Veracruz, or are only just becoming established. Others provide some kind of humanitarian aid but do not pay special attention to human rights violations nor record them. See the *Foro Migraciones* Directory, 2006, mimeo.



3. Public places: plazas, markets, bus stations, railway stations and rail yards, etc. These places on the whole are used by those who have least resources and support. At the same time, they are also used by traffickers whether for “disguising” their groups, recruiting migrants, finding potential accomplices for moving illegal merchandise, resting their groups, or getting rid of them.

#### (ENTRA MAPA)

This map allows us to indentify the primary land, sea and air routes which transmigrants must use.<sup>12</sup> There are two principle land routes. The Gulf route is the shortest and most used by Central American and Caribbean migrants. The Pacific route, although the longest, is primarily used by those whose final destination is the western United States, generally California. The air ports of entry are less traveled due to the elevated cost (airfares and corruption) implied. Therefore, they are mainly utilized by transmigrants with greater economic prospects (undocumented transcontinental migrants, Asians in particular, who do not have to spend working layovers in Mexico) and who use designated cities as air ports of entry for connecting with other means of transportation.

#### THE ROUTES OF CRIME, SOLIDARITY AND BUSINESS

Undocumented migrants are, in general, targets for robbery, assault, abuse and human rights violations. In particular, transmigrants, women, adolescents and children face the greatest risk of abuse and violations (there are cases of women who have been raped more than 20 times even before reaching the northern border of Mexico; in other words, the possibility exists of being the victim of similar aggressions before reaching their final destination). Although these violations may occur in any part of the country, there are certain areas which have a higher incidence of human rights violations, some only recently.<sup>13</sup> This is in part due to the migration authorities' actions and programs designed to contain transmigrant flow, which in turn modifies its routes, thus leading to the geographical relocation of victimizers. As a result, new areas emerge which displace others in terms of their strategic importance. By pushing flows from the coast towards central inland areas, places such as San Luis Potosi become gathering points for migrants and, within a short time, for those who traffic foreigners. Empirical evidence exists

<sup>12</sup> For illustrative purposes, sea routes have been drawn away from the coast but the actual routes are as close to the coast as possible; on the one hand, small boats avoid the risks of navigating on the high seas and on the other, passengers can quickly disembark if necessary.

<sup>13</sup> The Belen Shelter Report 2008 which comprises May 1, 2007-February 15, 2008, presents a list of 15 federal entities where violations have occurred. Taking into account the reports presented by the same shelter in past years as a reference, we can conclude that the number of places where these unpunished crimes are committed is increasing.



regarding the growing number of human rights violations of migrants during their stay or passage through Mexico. But victims rarely make formal complaints to the corresponding state authorities. Only some of the little information regarding violations some reaches humanitarian organizations providing assistance to migrants, and only a handful of these civil organizations record the violations. Furthermore, each one of these organizations maintains its own database; there is no common database due to the lack of compatibility in methodology as well as in other technical and fundamental aspects. Hence, there is no national record of migrant human rights violations or sufficient raw data to characterize them, determine their frequency, identify their agents, or the social and territorial circumstances in which they occur.<sup>14</sup>

Transmigration has its costs. There is a direct relationship between the rising number of obstacles and the rising costs of transit. The migration policies of the northern States of the continent have caused two negative secondary effects; the increase of trafficking networks and the increased cost of migrant transit. The combination of both effects further bleeds the economies of transmigrants who are forced to seek out different financial mechanisms during their passage through Mexico: 1) Initial savings (or loans, selling off of goods or remittances from the US); 2) Temporary work (particularly for women, this includes sex work in a larger percentage and recurrence than for men); 3) Staggered electronic wire transfers; 4) Humanitarian assistance, i.e. seeking out humanitarian shelters found along their journey through Mexico; and 5) Finding rides, particularly from freight transport in strategic places of Mexico, such as wholesale food markets.

Migration routes may be continuous or permanent. This depends on: 1) The carrying out of INM operatives (*volantas*), mainly carried out in strategic areas of the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco and Veracruz, most likely because of highway junctions and forks, train stations, etc.; 2) The installation of permanent INM or official checkpoints which exercise control for various purposes; 3) Changes in INM personnel or authorities in positions of control which imply protection renegotiation; 4) The creation of new support networks or commercial traffic; 5) Trafficking networks taking control of already existing networks, as occurs in some stretches of the Guatemalan border with Tabasco and Chiapas; 6) The construction of new public roads, already initiated in some parts of Chiapas after the start of the Zapatista movement in 1994; 7) Natural disasters such as those which occurred at the end of 2005 and the hurricanes of 2006 which particularly affected communities in Chiapas, and the railroad lines departing from Tapachula; 8) Foreseen obstacles on the southern border of the US such as new migration regulations in bordering areas, the presence of the National Guard, anti-migrant groups, etc.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth mentioning the continued efforts of the Belen Shelter in Saltillo, with its constant methodology and significant reports in 2006 and 2007, under the responsibility of the civil society organization, *Frontera con Justicia* ("Border with Justice").



The map gives the total of air, sea and land routes used by Central American transmigrants and by those from other areas (primarily Cuba and Asia). In all cases the use of the distinct routes is indicated rather than their context; the latter ensues from different decisions made by transmigrants and those who help or guide them.

The growing flow of international migrants entering or passing through Mexico, above all the undocumented coming from the south of the continent, could not be completely explained without considering the participation of distinct migrant trafficking networks. These networks play an active role in facilitating population displacement, from the place of origin, throughout the trajectory and up until to the final destination. As little is known about the organization and functioning of these networks, the figure of the *coyote* or *pollero* has been aggrandized and in many cases is presented as the sole agent or trafficker of migrants. The *pollero* is, in most cases, an agent (public or private) who subcontracts his services to diverse organisms and whose principal activity may or may not be trafficking; this is not to say that there no independent *polleros* who individually perform the diverse functions necessary; it is these *polleros* who are most often apprehended by public authorities, precisely because of their individual or barely coordinated efforts. In some cases, *polleros* and *pollos* fall into the hands of authorities because they were turned in by other traffickers. It is most likely that a very small minority of *polleros* are apprehended as a result of official investigations.

There is a complex stratification of functions within migrant trafficking networks.<sup>15</sup> Some of these are necessarily visible, while others must remain hidden for successful task completion. These functions, which include recruitment, organization, surveillance, escorting, guiding, and payment collection, are assigned to several different operators since human trafficking is a process that requires each participant to have very limited functions, whether part of a formal structure or not. There are also varying levels of competition among these criminal networks regarding human resources and materials, based on contacts within their operations. Many of the agents (public and private) subcontract their services to others within this interweaving system of networks. The successful performance of a trafficking organization is based on its network of collaborators simply because, if one of its agents is caught off guard and captured by authorities, the most that will be lost is one physical element, one of the many intermediaries in a complex structure, one that can easily be replaced, thus leaving the network intact.

Among the elements which make up the trafficking network are individuals linked to the goods and services sector, private agents (such as families) based in areas unrelated to trafficking, young people, farm workers and public agents

<sup>15</sup> Here we only refer to those who carry out their activities in open spaces in the Mexican south-southeast, which does not mean we ignore the existence of other criminal networks operating in closed, institutional spaces that give priority to documented migrants.



(among those who stand out are municipal police and migration agents, especially those who work on a local level). This wide, multilevel participation allows us to speak of a diverse collaborative structure and, taking into account the long history of migration, we can highlight the *social reproduction* of what is now a considerable amount of data regarding these criminal practices, in which many of the participants are known to have made or be making their first entry into human trafficking. This criminal corrosion has infiltrated various levels of government and diverse areas in the chain of command and operation, as well as in different social segments for quite some time and so far, in an uninterrupted and unchecked manner.

Central American countries, like Mexico, receive a growing amount of monetary wire transfers, or remittances. Remittances and flows link places of origin to destinations. Until now, little attention has been given to the transit space, either to the flows therein or the staggered payments which facilitate international mobility. The data in the following table should be considered in this context (payment origin and destination).

TABLE 3  
Remittances by country\*

COUNTRY/YEAR	2000	2005	2006
Guatemala	563	2,993	3,610
El Salvador	1,751	2,830	3,320
Honduras	410	1,788	2,300

\* Figures in millions of US dollars.

Source: The World Bank *Migration and Remittances Factbook* <http://go.worldbank.org/QOWEWD6TA0> y Inter-American Development Bank. 2008. "El Salvador and Remittances." January 10. On-line report: [http://www.iadb.org/mif/remittances/lac/remesas\\_es.cfm](http://www.iadb.org/mif/remittances/lac/remesas_es.cfm)

As access to electronic wire service becomes easier, transaction costs are lowered, the network of financial services broadens in places of transit and destination, the number of service providers grows; the migrant flow increases and consequently, so do remittances. These social and institutional processes have only occurred in recent years. These tendencies indicate a greater development and complexity of the remittance-migration-society relationship. If it were possible to analyze the records of businesses involved in remittance transfer and receipt, a detailed comparative study could be carried out focusing on amounts sent from the United States for transmigration purposes, those sent to finance the return of migrants who desist in their journey north, nationalities, lengths of stays, etc. but this is impossible as these records are private. There is, at least, the consolation of knowing that these records do exist; we need to find a way to access them. Meanwhile, with the information that is available we can see some of the daily implications, with due participation of many diverse agents and benefactors.



One of the most effective strategies used by transmigrants in recent years is the gradual reception of remittances throughout their long passage through Mexico, whether for continuing their journey north or to return home for those who desist. This practice of gradual remittances also generates new forms and mechanisms of social cohesion among Central American transmigrants passing through Mexico and local social groups, although this has also given rise to express kidnappings, which now may occur anytime and anywhere in Mexico. These are little known and rarely studied aspects of Central American remittances sent to Mexico. They should be understood in the context of articulation and cohesion among migrants, between them and their sponsors in the US, with the social environments they travel through, their families, and when all is said and done, with the social groups beyond borders, in places of origin, transit and destination: the strengthening of the social tapestry *from, because of and for* the subaltern migrant world, with results which do not circumscribe to this world nor are they limited to the transmigrants' countries of origin. However, these same remittances can leave migrants vulnerable in other ways, as discussed in following sections.

Staggered payments imply multiple benefits for different social agents, with objectives that are equally diverse:

- a) *For the sender.* He is able to send small amounts at determined times. It is no longer necessary to accumulate the total sum required for the journey prior to setting off, which is significant as the economic costs have increased considerably.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the risk of total or partial loss is eliminated, something which was prevalent before staggered payments were available. The loss of a single payment is certainly possible, but if this happens, it is small and relatively easily absorbed;
- b) *For the receiver.* Having the necessary cash to cover a determined stage of the trajectory is a double guarantee: the desired distance or trajectory is covered and life is insured. These expenses include the "right of way" for which, though irregular by

<sup>16</sup> W. Cornelius estimates that prices charged by *polleros* have tripled since 1993. He asserts that prior to the implementation of Operation Guardian, a *coyote* or *pollero* charged an average of \$143 dollars for taking a migrant across the border in the San Diego/Tijuana zone. By 1990, this figure had risen to \$490 dollars. By 2001, *polleros* operating in the San Diego and Centro zones were charging from \$1200 to \$1500 dollars per person. By January 2006 rates varied between \$2000 and \$3000 dollars. Rates are usually higher when migration involves covering great distances. Undocumented migrants from the province of Fujian, China may pay from \$30,000 to \$40,000 to be taken to North America, Europe or Japan. An OIT study estimates that the human trafficking business annually generates between 5 and 10 million dollars in profits globally. See Cornelius, Wayne, Thomas Espenshade and Idean Salehyan (eds), *The International Migration of the Highly Skilled*, Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2001 and \_\_\_\_\_, Philip Martin and James Hollifield, *Controlling Immigration. A Global Perspective*, Stanford University Press, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> The express kidnapping of undocumented migrants is an example of extreme violence. This criminal practice has benefitted from the staggered transfer system. Express kidnappings not only take place near the Mexico-US border, but also in parts of southern Mexico (such as Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca), under the expectation that ransom money can be sent electronically to a given account in any location.



- law is regular in common practice, government agents (corruption) or social agents (assault, robbery, lending of certain services, food, medicine or other goods needed) must be paid. Making illicit payments can mean low-risk travel for the migrant. Given the extent of this practice, we can assume that the greater part of total remittances for traveling through Mexico goes towards illegal “rights of way”;
- c) *For criminal networks.* Counting on a secure income, from an albeit atomized labor requiring more time and effort, without necessarily resorting to extreme violence,<sup>17</sup> provides an additional benefit: their criminal activity, once broken down, can escape the notice of public authorities, humanitarian organizations and the migrants themselves. As a consequence, this concealment inhibits social conflict, discourages active protest by those affected and does not allow for corrective government action which generally only ensues from spectacularly notorious events;
  - d) *For governmental authorities.* The existence of an *ad-hoc* mechanism which inhibits, distends or postpones social conflict, with or without state control, reduces social pressure on the State in the short term, particularly for Executive bodies responsible for social, migration, labor and justice matters;
  - e) *For social humanitarian organizations.* Only some offer aid services, with different perspectives and practices, which unintentionally form part of a larger social strategy of undocumented migration production, and;
  - f) *For multiservice, banking and stock market enterprises.* As international channels through which remittances are sent, their transnational base of clientele and services increases, that is, their presence and profits grow in the international promissory market. By way of illustration, the total sum of transactions of the countries shown in Table 3 in 2000 was 2.724 million dollars and 9.230 million dollars in 2006. In other words, the amount tripled within 6 years. Even only taking into account the transfer costs and the exchange rate used, profits for these businesses is very impressive. However, the differentiated system of remittance transfers on an international level is very complex, with significant cost for Latin American countries.<sup>18</sup>

This set of uncoordinated but simultaneous practices creates a valuable mechanism of production and social cohesion for migrants in their socially vulnerable subaltern groups in a distant land, the Mexican *interregnum*. The efficiency of this mechanism contributes to explaining the growth and diversification of the flows despite highly selective migrant policies which exclude them. In other words, *remittances sent to migrants in transit through Mexico provide a highly effective though intangible cohesive advantage, counteracting elements which mar their passage through Mexico. Furthermore, remittances diminish social conflict, reducing it to a constant strain, as long as the effects of the redistribution of travel remittances among the various involved social agents are effective and satisfactory.* It is therefore important

<sup>18</sup> See Manuel Oroczo’s paper “Development: Issues and Policy Opportunities”, presented at the Global Forum on Migration and Development, Belgium, 2007.



to analyze the remittance relationship for Central American transmigration and (return-) transmigration, and value the role that each social agent identified plays in it, since there are participations and agents who abuse the legal framework while others increase their criminal activity to the extreme of the deprivation of liberty, if not taking the life of a kidnapped person.

Inside the Elektra appliance stores, in association with Western Union and with other small local businesses, international migrants and their families can send and receive remittances. By October 2006, this chain store had a wide network of 1,569 stores in Mexico, 74 in Guatemala, 70 in Honduras, 30 in Panama and 81 in Peru, and ambitious plans exist to expand to other countries in the region as well as increase the amount of stores in the aforementioned countries.

#### THE MEXICAN CORRIDOR IN THE US-CENTRAL AMERICAN REGION AND BEYOND

The empirical evidence analyzed demonstrates the existence of a large region with a migrant flow that travels from Central America to the United States, with Mexico as the strategic area or international corridor, that is, the articulation of origin, transit and destination of Central American undocumented migration. In this transit space there is a diversification of flows and routes with the growing dynamic participation of diverse social agents and institutions which may or may not be operating legally, with impact on national, regional and local Mexicans who generate tension, an institutional pragmatism and, no doubt, important contradictions in Mexican migration policy. Everything shifts, except for the legal framework; everything moves quickly except for government action; the different social agents innovate (even if they make mistakes, they are later amended), while the various national migration authorities reinforce (knowingly) erroneous migration policies. It is a very serious situation.

The articulation of these three areas (origin-transit-destination) reveals an international process that is increasingly consolidated and buoyant, although in this article we have stressed social elements, institutions and public policy in the Mexican interregnum. However, precisely by presenting and giving dimension to the distinct processes which occur, based on proven elements and not just theory, the concurrence of different forms of delineated globalization can be explained. Thus the coordination efforts by the governments of the North, Central America and the Caribbean, for example, and instruments such as the Regional Migration Conference (which has been meeting twice a year since 1996), among others; the financial network of remittances which links, at least in this case, the United States, Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean and the Andes region; the migrant trafficking networks and human traffic, with ramifications reaching far beyond the American continent; humanitarian networks which connect the geographical migrant spaces; migrants' social and family networks which inter-





weave increasingly larger and more diverse environments; and finally, the virtual networks which bring them all together: institutions, civil organizations and migrants. Do we change, innovate and broaden the horizon or do we maintain the inertia?

