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Policy Points

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The Need for Local Reintegration Policy/Programs in Rural Mexico

Meredith Giel

Key Points

- A growing number of Mexican citizens are returning to Mexico from the United States.
- This returning population is increasingly poor and rural.
- Mexico does not have the social and economic infrastructure in place to help returning migrants reintegrate back into society.
- A new multilateral strategy must be implemented at both the state and municipal level to manage the spatially dispersed nature of return migration across Mexico.

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Introduction

Since 2007, a growing number of Mexican immigrants in the United States have been returning to Mexico. For the first time since the 1960s, net migration in Mexico is zero¹, implying that just as many Mexicans are returning to Mexico as are going to the United States.ⁱ It is estimated that double the amount of Mexicans, approximately 1.4 million, left the United States between 2005 and 2010 than in the previous decade.ⁱⁱ Roughly 400 000 Mexican migrants returned to Mexico in 2011 alone.ⁱⁱⁱ Of these migrants returning to Mexico, it is thought that two-thirds of them returned voluntarily.^{iv}

There are a number of factors contributing to this return migration by Mexican nationals. These include the U.S. economic recession which resulted in a shortness of service-sector jobs that often attract Mexican migrants, an increase in border enforcement and control at the border between Mexico and the U.S., and a rise in violence in the border regions.^v

Those returning to Mexico as skilled professionals likely arrive with savings as well as with the capabilities to find work in their field. Conversely, unskilled migrants often return after losing their job in the U.S. and are much more vulnerable, lacking the money and the skill-set to successfully start a new life.^{vi} Unfortunately, a large proportion of return migrants are unskilled workers originating from rural villages in remote and secluded areas of Mexico.

This current situation presents the Mexican government with new priorities and responsibilities. Upon return, many of these unskilled workers face barriers preventing proper reintegration back into Mexican society, including a lack of support networks, potential language and cultural barriers dependent on the length of time they spent in the United States, and a lack of skills needed for available employment.

The Mexican government is not prepared to assist and support the number of returning migrants.^{vii} This lack of reintegration support causes many returning migrants to again leave Mexico and fosters a circular form of migration.^{viii} Many migrants continue to move back and forth across the border throughout the year and only stay in each place for a few months at a time, alternating between working in the U.S. and living in Mexico.^{ix} This cycle generally persists throughout the lifetime of Mexican migrants.^x

Why Rural?

Focusing on those returning to rural areas is important for a number of reasons. Over the past two decades, there has been an evident increase in the number of Mexican nationals returning to rural communities in Mexico. Approximately 45 per cent of migrants return to rural localities with less than 15 000 inhabitants.^{xi} Although numbers cannot be entirely accurate due to limitations in the data collected, it is estimated that there has been almost 10 per cent increase in the

¹ It is important to keep in mind that, when compared to the United States, net migration to all other countries is inconsequential.

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number of rural migrants within the total return migrant population since 1990.^{xii} Due to the aforementioned push factors, this number will likely continue to increase.

Recent studies have shown evidence of the changing pattern of return migration from the U.S. to Mexico.^{xiii} Where migrants have typically returned to traditional sending communities², this number is decreasing while the number of migrants returning to the south and southeastern regions is increasing.^{xiv} As the proportion of migrants returning to rural communities increases, these regions, which are not traditional sending states^{xv}, are likely unprepared for the influx of return migrants. Returning migrants can place stress on communities by adding pressure onto local budgets by increasing the demand for health care, education, and assistance programs.^{xvi} As these communities are often far from Mexico's urban regions, the much-needed support from existing national programs is frequently inaccessible. Many of these new return destinations are some of the poorest rural areas in Mexico and are unable to implement programs on their own due to a lack of capacity and resources.^{xvii}

Current Reintegration Policies

At the national level, there are two existing reintegration programs in Mexico. The Programa Paisano (1989) aims to improve services along entry points along the Mexican border, at seaports, and at international airports and ensures the fair treatment of returning migrants.^{xviii} This program focuses mainly on the return of Mexican nationals to Mexico for short periods of time rather than on their long-term reintegration.^{xix} The Human Repatriation Programme (2009) provides migrants with basic necessities upon arrival in Mexico, a free phone call to families in Mexico, and a variety of types of support including psychosocial, cultural, and financial. Unfortunately, this program is solely implemented in cities along the U.S.-Mexican border and it lacks any focus on the reintegration of return migrants once they have reached their home communities.^{xx} This program is also limited because, although much of the services are appropriate for voluntary rural migrants, it is designed only for those Mexican immigrants who have been deported from the U.S.

Some rural communities in Mexico have introduced smaller scale initiatives that promote reintegration and assistance. The Community Foundation of the Bajío (2009), implemented in ten rural communities in the state of Guanajuato, offers support to migrants by providing assistance in microenterprises and employment. Additionally, it grants a form of employment insurance to migrants who returned after losing their jobs in the U.S.^{xxi} The For Just a Market Project, implemented in the Northern Mexican state of Chihuahua, focuses on creating jobs, improving productivity and increasing the income of rural farmers through the commercialization of apple farming. Although the main focus of this program is not reintegration, it does aim to offer opportunities to aid those reintegrating.^{xxii}

Policies in the area of reintegration are limited. Also problematic is the fact that existing programs focus their attention and services solely on northern Border States and traditional sending communities in Central Mexico. Figure 1 shows the locations of all of the aforementioned programs. The rest of the country does not receive much-needed reintegration

² Traditional sending states are areas which typically experience out-migration of migrants to the United States. In Mexico, these states are typically in the Center-West of Mexico such as Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Colima, Durango, Jalisco, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Nayarit, and Michoacán. These communities generally have support networks and programs in place for migrants. (Claudia Masferrer and Dr. Bryan Roberts, "Going Back Home? Changing Demography and Geography of Mexican Return Migration," *Population Research and Policy Review* 31 [2012]).

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programs and assistance. This is especially problematic for small, remote rural communities which are likely to suffer greatly as, even if national policies were created and implemented, they are often inaccessible. In essence, many of these communities are far from the border cities and thus programs implemented in these regions do not reach migrants once they depart.

Figure 1. Coverage of Current Reintegration Programs. Modified from: Wikimedia Commons, File: Mexico Map.svg, http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mexico_Map.svg (September 29, 2009)

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Programs

A number of assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programs exist globally. A variety of different actors and organizations are involved in facilitating the return migration of irregular migrants. One of the leading organizations in the migration field involved in the implementation of AVRR is the International Organization on Migration (IOM). The IOM has begun a worldwide AVRR initiative which “aims at orderly, humane and cost-effective return and reintegration of migrants who are willing to return voluntarily to their countries of origin”.^{xxiii} AVRR programs have been operating in Mexico since 2005 but focus mainly on aiding migrants using Mexico as a transit route to return to other countries in Central and South America and the Caribbean.^{xxiv}

The IOM has the ability to greatly impact and support Mexican return migration by using similar programs. The IOM could aid governments in Mexico in the creation and implementation of a more successful program by sharing their existing project structures and their knowledge on reintegration and resettlement programs worldwide.

The introduction of AVRR is met with a fair amount of opposition due to potential migrant rights issues. One of the largest criticisms is the fact that the categorization of such programs, Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, is misleading since these programs lack genuine voluntariness.^{xxv} Conversely, some have commented that AVRR programs “can constitute a welcome option for migrants wishing to return home”.^{xxvi}

It is important to note that, in this Mexican case, the group of migrants these programs would be targeting are those who are returning to Mexico by their own choice. AVRR programs are already in place in Mexico for those being deported, but those returning voluntarily often do not qualify for such programs. Those realizing the recommended

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AVRR strategy in Mexico must take time and care to ensure that voluntary returns remain separate from those returns that are forced. To do this, programs aiding those returning voluntarily should remain institutionally separate from programs aiding those being returned by force.^{xxvii} Furthermore, program administrators must implement monitoring mechanisms within the program to ensure that all returns remain genuinely voluntary.^{xxviii}

Learning from Others: Guatemala, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia

A number of countries in Latin America recently experiencing increased return migration have implemented AVRR programs with the help of the IOM. These programs are often executed through partnerships between the IOM and both governmental and non-governmental organizations and many place emphasis on targeting ‘vulnerable groups’, such as rural populations.^{xxix} When implementing its own rural reintegration programs, Mexico can take the lessons-learned from these examples. For instance, policy options for Mexico can be selected by evaluating similar programs, such as the Guatemalan Repatriates Project, the AENAS Project, and Bienvenido a Casa (Welcome Home), in Guatemala, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Colombia respectively.

Table 1 shows the different components within reintegration programs in each of the four Latin American countries and compares them to the existing programs in Mexico. The Mexico column has been divided into three different categories: those in red are components currently not in any of Mexico’s existing programs, those in blue exist in the two larger-scale initiatives, and those in yellow exist only in the small-scale initiatives.

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Table 1. Recommendations for Mexico using analysis of current programs and other countries as examples.

	Guatemala	Bolivia	Ecuador	Colombia	Mexico
Transportation Services	■				■
Migrant Shelters	■				■
Legal Assistance				■	
Psychosocial Assistance				■	■
Housing Assistance			■		
Medical Assistance			■		
Support Networks in Destinations	■				
Educational Support			■	■	
Job Skills Training	■			■	■
Job Search Assistance	■	■		■	
Business Setup Assistance		■	■		■
Employment Referrals	■	■		■	
Follow Up and Monitoring of Migrants			■	■	
Capacity Building and Personnel Training		■			■

It is evident that no one program in any of the four Latin American cases has every aspect of a reintegration program. However, by looking at all four cases and taking different components from each, much more well-rounded recommendations for reintegration programs in Mexico can be proposed. From examining what has been done in other countries, one is able to make recommendations for a reintegration and resettlement model to be implemented in Mexico.

Why Compare these Countries to Mexico?

There are a number of reasons for comparing these countries to Mexico aside from sheer geographical proximity and cultural similarity. Similar to Mexico, each country has previously had proportions of their populations travel to the U.S. and has recently experienced an influx of return migrants. The Guatemalan program is most applicable to Mexico as it is one of two IOM programs in the region that assists the most migrants returning from the U.S.

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The proportion of the rural population in each country is also significant for comparison. As the comparison and analysis of these programs is performed in order to create successful rural reintegration programs in Mexico, the lessons from those programs focusing on rural populations should be prioritized. As over half of Guatemala's population is rural, its reintegration programs will have a more rural focus than that of Colombia. Thus, although the program in Colombia has some components that could potentially be implemented in Mexico, it is a program that is primarily urban-based. Therefore, some limitations may occur when trying to implement some components similar to those in Bienvenido a Casa.

Potential Limitations of Reintegration Programs^{xxx}

Although these programs have been largely successful, the IOM has cited some limitations to the success of these programs:

- 1) Programs provide limited reintegration assistance due to funding constraints.
- 2) Existing programs do not have the desired level of long-term monitoring and support.
- 3) Most governments still lack the necessary levels of equipment, resources, and capacity.

Recommendations

The lack of reintegration assistance programs for many of those returning to Mexico is a pressing concern. Approximately 400 000 migrants return to Mexico each year, almost half of whom are returning to rural areas. For this reason, it is vital to implement programs to assist Mexican return migrants in a timely fashion. These programs have great potential to benefit Mexican society and economy because, if reintegration programs are successful in assisting and integrating rural migrants, there will be less motivation and economic incentive to seek employment in the U.S. According to surveys, most migrants would prefer to stay in Mexico in their own communities rather than being completely dependent on finding employment in the United States.^{xxxii} Through the creation of an effective support system, the Mexican government can ensure that this critical demographic can contribute key resources to the vitality and success of the Mexican economy and society.

In order to accomplish successful rural reintegration programs, there are a number of recommendations:

- Mexico's status within the existing AVRR structure needs to shift. Mexico needs to be viewed as both a sending and receiving country of return migrants rather than the current view of solely being a sending country of migrants returning to other countries.^{xxxii} Once this is accomplished, programming and policy in Mexico can provide aid to migrants returning to other nations through Mexico as well as Mexican nationals returning to Mexico.
- In order to implement reintegration programming and policies, cooperation must occur between the IOM and all levels of government in Mexico. Without collaboration, programming will likely not be feasible.

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- Funding is a vital aspect of programming success. Although a cost-estimate for similar programs is not available, the IOM aims to implement the most 'cost-effective' programs.^{xxxiii} These programs could potentially be subsidized by the pre-existing Regional Conference on Migration (RCM) fund.³ As a member of the RCM and an annual contributor to the fund, the Mexican government should be able to use the available resources to create and implement rural reintegration programs.^{xxxiv} The remaining funding should be provided by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM), Mexico's national immigration department. Some funding could also be provided by non-governmental organizations. The funding should be centralized in order to provide each community the equal opportunity to implement successful programs.
- Programming and policy implementation should be decentralized and executed at the local level. This will ensure migrants returning to rural communities far from the urban centres and traditional sending states will have access to programs and assistance. The IOM should train local non-governmental organizations and local levels of government to be self-sufficient in the administration of such programs.
- A pronged approach should be taken when implementing new reintegration programming in Mexico. The first stage should involve selecting a state that has a high level of return migrants to act as a pilot area. If deemed a success upon completion, this pilot project could be expanded to other areas. Specifics of each program would need to be modified and adapted on a state by state basis. The design may vary depending on the specific type of migrants returning, the type of occupational opportunities, whether or not it is a border region, etc.
- Recommendations for rural reintegration programs should take into consideration Latin American countries that currently have reintegration programs in place, especially Guatemala, as well as the smaller scale programs currently operating in Mexico. The particulars of such a program should consider the successes and failures of integration programs both in Mexico, and in Central American countries that have experienced similar increases in a returning diaspora. When creating a new program model, policy makers should attempt to include the components within the red category while expanding the blue and yellow components to be included within all programs (see Table 1).
- Extending an invitation for U.S. involvement and foreign assistance in these reintegration programs should be considered. Reintegration programs have the potential to reduce migration pressures and lessen the amount of migrants travelling north to the U.S. American foreign assistance and investment in rural

³ The Regional Conference on Migration (RCM) consists of a group of governments from Central America which has agreed to coordinate efforts in order to provide assistance to return migrants. In 2004, this group of governments created a fund which each Member country contributes to annually. The fund can then help these Member countries to create and implement programs for the return and reintegration of migrants. (Source: International Organization for Migration, *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Annual Report of Activities 2011* [Geneva, Switzerland, 2012]).

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reintegration and development programs could allow the U.S. to help resolve the lack of employment and opportunity in Mexico resulting in international migration to the U.S. and further promote American security and law enforcement.^{xxxv}

ⁱ Sara Miller Llana, "Home again in Mexico: Illegal immigration hits net zero," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 8, 2012 (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2012/0408/Home-again-in-Mexico-Illegal-immigration-hits-net-zero>).

ⁱⁱ Hope Yen, "Mexican Migration Appears to be in Reverse," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, April 24, 2012 (<http://utsandiego.com/news/2012/apr/24/tp-mexican-migration-appears-to-be-in-reverse/>).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ignacio de los Reyes, "Mexico's Migrants return as the American Dream Fades," BBC News, February 29, 2012 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-radio-and-tv-17190679?print=true>).

^{iv} Yen.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Llana.

^{vii} De los Reyes.

^{viii} International Organization for Migration, *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Annual Report of Activities 2011* (Geneva, Switzerland, 2012), 61.

^{ix} Jeffrey Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *Mexican Immigrants: How Many Come? How Many Leave?*, Pew Research Centre, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/07/22/mexican-immigrants-how-many-come-how-many-leave/> (July 22, 2009).

^x Kevin Thom, *Repeated Circular Migration: Theory and Evidence from Undocumented Migrants*, https://files.nyu.edu/kt44/public/RepeatedCircularMigration_Jun09.pdf (June 25, 2009).

^{xi} Claudia Masferrer and Dr. Bryan Roberts, "Going back home? The Ambiguities of Contemporary Mexican Return Migration," *Bilateral Perspectives on Mexican Migration* (UTSA Mexican Center: Texas), 2011. https://utsa.edu/mexicocenter/Flyers/Presentations%20BPMM%202011/Session%20VI/Going%20back%20home_MigrationConference%20SanAntonioUTSA.pdf (April 1, 2013)

^{xii} Raymundo M. Campos-Vazquez and Jaime Lara, "Self-selection patterns among return migrants: Mexico, 1990-2010," *Journal of Migration*, 1:8 (2012), 6.

^{xiii} Masferrer and Roberts, "Going back home? The Ambiguities of Contemporary Mexican Return Migration."

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} Campos-Vazquez and Lara, 6.

^{xvi} De los Reyes.

^{xvii} Claudia Masferrer and Dr. Bryan Roberts, "Going Back Home? Changing Demography and Geography of Mexican Return Migration," *Population Research and Policy Review* 31(2012).

^{xviii} Secretaría de Gobernación and Instituto Nacional de Migración, *Programa Paisano*, <http://www.paisano.gob.mx/index.php/programa-paisano/antecedentes>

^{xix} Secretaría de Gobernación and Instituto Nacional de Migración, *Programa Paisano*, <http://www.paisano.gob.mx/>

^{xx} International Organization for Migration, *IOM Supports Mexico's National Migration Institute to Assist Returning Migrants*, <http://www.iom.int/cms/sites/iom/home/news-and-views/press-briefing-notes/pbn-2009/pbn-listing/iom-supports-mexicos-national-migration.html>

^{xxi} Llana.

^{xxii} Andrew Wainer, "Development and Migration in Rural Mexico," (Bread for the World Institute, 2011), 4.

^{xxiii} International Organization for Migration, *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Annual Report of Activities 2011*, 23.

^{xxiv} International Organization for Migration, *Mexico*, <http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/where-we-work/americas/central-and-north-america-and-th/mexico.default.html?displayTab=latest-news> (January 2012)

^{xxv} Anne Koch, "Assisted Voluntary Return Schemes," *Forced Migration Review* 44 (September 2013).

^{xxvi} Ibid.

^{xxvii} Ibid.

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^{xxviii} Parliamentary of the Council of Europe. Committee on Migration, Refugees and Population. Voluntary return programmes: an effective, humane and cost-effective mechanism for returning irregular migrants. 2010.

<http://assembly.coc.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=12461&Language=en>

^{xxix} International Organization for Migration, *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Annual Report of Activities 2011*.

^{xxx} Ibid.

^{xxxi} Llana.

^{xxxii} International Organization for Migration, *Mexico*.

^{xxxiii} International Organization for Migration, *Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration: Annual Report of Activities 2011*, 23.

^{xxxiv} Ibid.

^{xxxv} Wainer, 1-2.