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Mexican Indigenous, Migration, And International Remittances¹

In the Americas, we all have a trace
 of first people's blood.
 Some in our veins, and others on our hands.
 EDUARDO GALEANO

Different kinds of indigenous migration in the pre-Hispanic era have been widely researched: the movements that populated the Americas; those associated with natural phenomena like animal migrations and seasonal climate changes; migrations linked to the expansion of the Aztec empire; those arising from Mesoamerican trade; and the ones motivated by pilgrim-

ages to sacred sites. All of these influenced the development of new intercultural relations and the progressive construction of ethnic identities in that period. The consequences of the migration spurred by the Spaniards' land-grabbing of indigenous lands when they arrived cannot be compared to any others. The latter, resulting from colonial domination, gave rise to certain interethnic mixes, hybridization with the hegemonic Spanish culture, and became a permanent part of the profound, non-homogeneous transformations experienced by the first peoples during this stage, and which were manifested in redefinitions of their clothing, religions, institutions, languages, and political and economic organization.

Beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, indigenous migration also began to result from the expansion and deepening of capitalism. Research has shown that, in the second half of the twentieth century, their internal migration toward the big economic centers and regions

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Our hypothesis is that indigenous remittances grew continually from 2000 to 2010. This jibes with the insertion of these indigenous migrants in the U.S. labor market and their increased numbers.

increased so they could join the agro-industrial export labor markets; become part of the construction of large works of infrastructure like hydroelectric plants and highways; and get jobs in maquiladora plants, big tourist developments, and the broad range of activities in the service sector. The import substitution model marked a significant rhythm of industrialization and economic growth that gave rise to a new intensification of migratory flows, typically employment-oriented, which has been particularly important for the spatial and territorial reconfiguration and the socio-cultural and identity-based redefinition of the Mexican and Latin American indigenous communities.

It should be mentioned that the links between internal and international indigenous migration are profound. The wave of migrants from Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Guerrero toward Tijuana and Mexico City contributed to the signing of the *bracero* agreements (1942-1964). Later, the flows of Oaxacan indigenous agricultural workers toward Sinaloa, Sonora, and the San Quintín Valley in Baja California extended to the fields of California. However, international indigenous migration had a low profile until the late 1980s. The last 20 years of the twentieth century and the first 19 of this century have witnessed a strong increase in indigenous mobility toward our neighbor to the north and, to a lesser degree, toward Canada.

Indigenous migration is not divorced from the behavior of the overall flow of Mexicans toward the United States, which in that same period increased until the total number of Mexican immigrants in that country reached 12 million and 31 million residents of Mexican descent. The rise in the number of indigenous people in these flows has been clear in the ethnic re-composition of the Mexico-United States migratory system, as noted by Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado.² The Survey on Migration on the Northern Border of Mexico (EMIF) notes that indigenous people represent 9.8 percent of all Mexican migrants to the United States.³ Other Latin American indigenous communities are also immersed in this kind of migration

toward North America and Europe: the Otaval Quechua of Ecuador toward Spain; the Chorotegas from Nicaragua; Panama's Ngäbe people toward Costa Rica; and the Maya, Huehuetec, and Quetzaltepec from Guatemala toward the United States, among others.

Outstanding among indigenous migrants from Mexico are the Purépecha, Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya, Totonac, Nahua, Nñhañu, Mixe, Triqui, Tzotzil, and Tzeltal. The first three have been migrating the longest: they were part of the migratory flows organized beginning with the *bracero* agreements. The rest, from Yucatán, Veracruz, Chiapas, Hidalgo, and Puebla, stand out because of the numbers of international migrants in the period. Despite these migrants' going all over the United States, different research projects have noted that they are particularly concentrated in California, New York, Oregon, Texas, and Florida, where members of most of these ethnic groups are living.

Mexican migrants are employed in different economic sectors, more than 60 percent in the service sector, but they are a large percentage of agricultural workers (more than 70 percent of whom are of Mexican origin). Young indigenous are prominent in the cultivation of fruits and vegetables (strawberries, blueberries, cucumbers, and green and yellow squash, among others). This is a very important activity, since the United States is the world's second largest exporter of food products. This means that indigenous labor plays a key role in U.S. international competitiveness and in the social reproduction of its workers through the low prices of widely consumed agricultural products.⁴

A great deal has been written about the causes of these international migratory flows, and the idea that they are spurred by poverty—which certainly exists—and backwardness in the countries of origin continues to prevail. Mexico's National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (Coneval) estimates that the percentage of the indigenous-language-speaking population living in poverty in 2016 was almost double that of the non-indigenous population: 77.6 percent versus 40.6 percent.⁵ Coneval figures also state that the proportion of the indigenous population living in extreme poverty was six times larger than the non-indigenous: 34.8 percent vs. 5.5 percent. In addition, this is reflected in the fact that, in 2016, of the entire indigenous population, 31.6 percent reported an educational lag; 30 percent had insufficient access to food; 77.6 percent had no social security coverage; 15.1 percent had no access whatsoever to health

services; and 53.6 percent had housing lacking in basic services. These characteristics are undoubtedly necessary for explaining migration, but they are also partial, incomplete, and used to justify the anti-immigrant, xenophobic policies prevalent in the U.S. and worldwide. They ignore the fact that, historically, Mexican peasants (many of whom hide their indigenous roots) have been sought-after and highly appreciated by U.S. growers, something that intensified significantly during the boom in capitalist globalization, even under the crisis and unstable recovery conditions of the last decade or more. The need for workers with specialized knowledge, even if that knowledge is not recognized by formal education, was reinforced, as well as the need for workers willing to do back-breaking work for low wages, suffering violations of their most elemental labor and human rights.

International indigenous migratory processes are connected to the search for labor flexibility and precarious employment and for workers who will accept these conditions, whether they are from the home country or from abroad. Clearly, these are conditions that reveal that both countries' labor markets are linked in a relationship of subordinate complementarity. Mexico's economic, political, and social subordination to the United States is a fact; the catalyst marking the pattern of these migratory processes is U.S. economic and demographic conditions, with a market that requires that work force to live in a state of exclusion, not only as migrants, many undocumented, but also as indigenous.

Being a migrant and indigenous creates a very broad series of phenomena in the countries and communities of origin and in the destination and transit countries and communities. One of these involves remittances, linked to different eventualities: general and specific labor market conditions; the cost of transferring money; exchange rates; migratory policies; the development of individual, identity, gender, family, and community histories, which are interlinked with the dynamic and meaning of being a migrant; and the characteristics and conditions of migratory flows, which have a broad influence on those who send money, the frequency with which they do so, and the amounts involved. Indigenous remittances have remained invisible in the overall amount of remittances sent by Mexican migrants. Less attention has been paid to identifying them because of the difficulty in measuring them; this means that they remain absent in Mexican public

and private institutions' conventional reports on remittances. To a great extent, this is due to limitations in survey design. The official statistic is structured to report on what it deems a homogeneous phenomenon, according to units of register and its geographical scale; this is a barrier to disaggregating the information in a different way. The transfer of wages for family and social reproduction, particularly among the indigenous, acquires a different significance from that of the rest of remittances, since both their transfer and their use have specific reference points for territoriality, community integration, citizenship, systems of charges, as well as their particular idea of the contexts that guarantee family reproduction. That is why the results of these wage transfers spur identity references and community life in general in a confused, varied way.

To research indigenous remittances, we worked with a broad, multidisciplinary group of researchers.⁶ This allowed us to respond to the main question we posed: Of the total volume of remittances that arrive in Mexico, what percentages and amounts were received by indigenous communities in 2000 and 2010? The article we co-authored with Teresa García explains the methodology used;⁷ here, we only explain the results for the eight states selected, which answer the question posed to a certain level of generality. In the states of Yucatán, Chiapas, Michoacán, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Hidalgo, Puebla, and Guerrero, US\$6.647 billion were received in all. The contribution of the indigenous-language-speakers was 2 percent of that, or US\$240 million (at constant 2010 prices). By 2010, when Mexico received US\$23 billion, the contribution of the indigenous-language-speakers came to 6.2 percent, or more than US\$1.4 billion.⁸ The self-identified indigenous population's contribution to the national total was 4.9 percent in 2000 (US\$586 million) and ten years later, 9.6 percent, or more than US\$2.2 billion. The former population's contribution to the national total tripled, going from 2 to 6.2 percent, with a 495-percent growth rate; while the latter's contribution almost doubled, from 4.9 percent to 9.6 percent, at a 277-percent growth rate.

According to Bank of Mexico information, between 2007 and 2010, total remittances received in the country dropped significantly compared to 2006.

Remittances are used to improve nutrition, education, and health. But there is no clear evidence about the possibility that they influence the communities' recovery and identity-based cohesion.

This information allows us to put forward the hypothesis that indigenous remittances grew continually from 2000 to 2010. This jibes with the insertion of indigenous migrants in the U.S. labor market and the increased number of indigenous migrants. This can also be observed in the growth in the number of indigenous municipalities that contained remittance-receiving households in the states selected: by 2010, these came to 517 municipalities, while in 2000 there had been 438. A similar trend can be seen in the number of indigenous households/dwellings that receive remittances, which rose in the same period from 30 652 to 44 915. In 2010, we localized changes that show the increased number of indigenous receiving remittances. The proportion of indigenous remittances from the eight selected states in the national total rose. In certain emblematic cases, such as that of Puebla, the remittances of indigenous-language-speakers rose from US\$5 million to US\$211 million; and those of self-identified indigenous rose from US\$21 million to US\$298 million. Remittances sent to indigenous communities in Yucatán, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz, Hidalgo, and Michoacán increased along these same lines.

By contrast, according to Bank of Mexico information, between 2007 and 2010, total remittances received in the country dropped significantly compared to 2006. The annual total remittance variation rate went from 14.5 percent in 2006 to -1 percent in 2007 and -7 percent and -15 percent for 2008 and 2009, respectively. By 2010, remittances dropped 1.7 percent. It should be pointed out that almost half of all the ethno-linguistic groups recognized in Mexico participate to some degree in the transfer of remittances. However, the reception of these resources is highly concentrated ethnically. Using both criteria (indigenous-language-speakers and self-identified indigenous), in 2010, only five groups concentrated almost 90 percent of the remittances received: Nahuas, Purépechas, Mixtecs, Totonacs, and N̄hañus. One remaining task is to move ahead

with the analysis of what these remittances mean to indigenous peoples.

To conclude, we would point out that different research projects have corroborated that the benefits obtained are used to improve nutrition, education, and health. But it has also been shown that there is no clear evidence about the possibility that remittances influence in the communities' recovery and identity-based cohesion. Another series of effects must be identified involving the fact that remittances are not able to stop the draining of life-blood that accompanies migration: the loss of indigenous languages and cultural identity, family break-up, and changes to eating habits detrimental to people's health, among others. We must build a future in which migration is a free decision and does not happen at the cost of the disintegration of indigenous communities. ■■■

Notes

- 1 The author wishes to thank Martín García for his technical support.
- 2 Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, "Indígenas mexicanos migrantes en Estados Unidos" (Mexico City: H. Cámara de Diputados de la LIX Legislatura-University of California at Santa Cruz-Universidad Autónoma de Zacatecas-Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2004).
- 3 El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, "Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Norte de México, EMIF Norte" (Mexico City: Colef, 2016).
- 4 Patricia Pozos and Daniela Castro, "Las remesas de la población indígena oaxaqueña. El caso de los mixtecos en los campos de fresa en Oxnard, California," in Genoveva Roldán, José Gasca, and Carolina Sánchez, comps., *La travesía de las remesas y la senda de la migración indígena en México* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, UNAM, 2019).
- 5 Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (Coneval), *Informe de evaluación de la política de desarrollo social 2018* (Mexico City: Coneval, 2018).
- 6 Genoveva Roldán Dávila and Carolina Sánchez García (comps.), *Remesas, migración y comunidades indígenas de México* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, Programa Universitario de la Diversidad Cultural y la Interculturalidad [PUIC], UNAM, 2015); and Genoveva Roldán Dávila, José Gasca Zamora, and Carolina Sánchez García (comps.), *La travesía de las remesas y la senda de la migración indígena en México* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, UNAM, 2019).
- 7 Genoveva Roldán Dávila and Teresa García Zarate, "El aporte de las remesas indígenas en México: perspectiva nacional, análisis municipal y por grupo étnico," in Genoveva Roldán Dávila, Teresa García Zarate, and José Gasca Zamora, *La travesía de las remesas y la senda de la migración indígena en México* (Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, UNAM, 2019).
- 8 It should be noted that the two categories, indigenous-language-speakers and self-identified indigenous people, are different. The former, the most widely used statistically, is explained earlier in the text and is self-explanatory; the latter refers to those people who self-identify as indigenous based on their culture, traditions, and history, but whose language has been lost over the generations. The latter is, then, the broader category.