

## THE CENTRAL AMERICAN CARAVANS LESSONS LEARNED\*

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*Gang violence put an end to the life  
of one of her closest friends in 2013  
and that of her older brother in 2015.*

*Later, only a few weeks ago,  
gang members killed her 18-year-old nephew,  
who had just been deported from the United States.*

*Erica fears that now they're coming for her  
and her daughters. The girls no longer go out alone.*

*Erica has requested visas twice  
to go to the United States,  
but they have been denied both times.*

Unicef, "Childhood in Danger"

August 2018

### Preamble, Context, and General Concepts

Migration has resoundingly shaken the world agenda starting with the arrival of millions of migrants and refugees to the shores of Europe from Northern Africa and the Near East. We have witnessed the images of improvised boats in the Mediterranean with dozens of people aboard, the long lines of dehydrated, emaciated men, women, and children, awaiting registration by immigration officials, terrified because of being on the verge of drowning like hundreds of others who lost their lives in the attempt.

The ramifications of this movement of millions of people have had an enormous political, social, and economic impact on the countries that have taken them in and can also be seen in the rise of radical xenophobic, na-

\* Article translated from Spanish by Heather Dashner Monk.

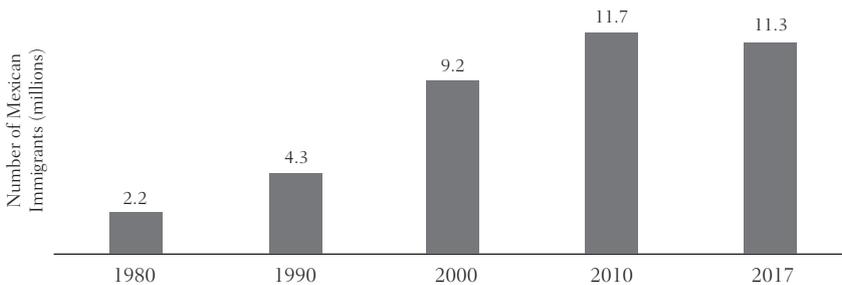
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tionalist movements that accuse their governments of allowing “the others” in, that is, people with different religious, cultural, and racial backgrounds. This has had a budgetary cost that is difficult to quantify, both for the European Union and for the destination countries.

This article is written because of the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Central Americans to Mexico’s southern border beginning in November 2018 in an attempt to get to the U.S. border and request asylum there. The matter is extraordinarily complex, and its analysis would require more space and time than is possible in this contribution.

These initial reflections and the lessons learned must also be taken with a degree of caution, since a social phenomenon like this one is difficult to assess and its consequences are difficult to interpret in the short and medium term. This is due to the dynamic nature of migrants’ international movements, especially when they are undocumented.

GRAPH I  
NUMBER OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES (1980-2017)



SOURCE: Grupo de Estudio de Migración México-Estados Unidos, Migration Policy Institute (2019).

As I write this, new events continue to occur that will influence the evolution of the future entry and transit through Mexico of undocumented migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. However, it is clear that this is a humanitarian crisis unprecedented in this region. It is without a doubt one of the most important and complex challenges the Mexican government has to face internally and in its future relations with the United States and the Central American isthmus.

Mexico has been a country of migrants, as a place of origin, of transit, and even as a destination. Its diaspora is one of the world’s largest.

Millions of Mexicans from practically all the states in the country have travelled to “El Norte” seeking a better opportunity for their lives. Today, one in every twelve Mexicans lives or resides in the United States.

Our country’s geographical location makes it a transit area toward the United States.

Over time, in Mexico, emigrating to the United States has come to be considered a kind of “right” to go to work temporarily or definitively, without taking into consideration what our Constitution says.<sup>1</sup> And the exit of millions of Mexicans was a kind of escape valve for the pressures on the labor market produced by the country’s demographic evolution.

The links between places of origin and the diaspora relocated in U.S. cities took on a life of their own. The experience of thousands of little rural towns and urban areas matured into a veritable integrated network thanks to which they inform the prevailing working conditions in their possible destinations. Remittances grew and became the sole source of subsistence for millions of families, and the use of *coyotes* or *polleros*, as human smugglers are known, became a business worth millions.

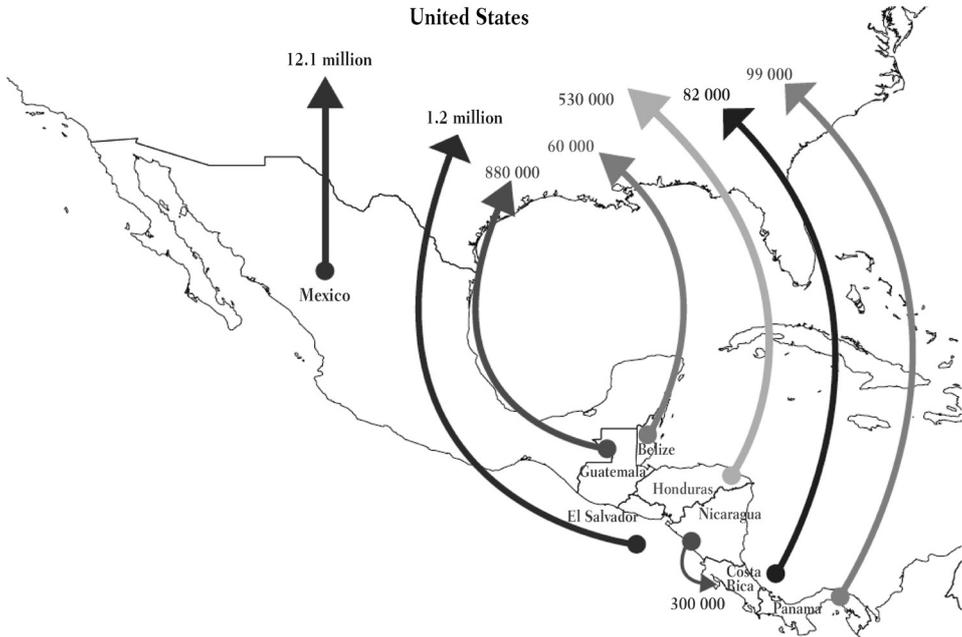
This is relevant because the very same elements became the pattern for and explain Central American emigration today, with the additional factor that they face serious risks while moving through Mexico to reach the border with the United States.

The economies of Central American countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras depend enormously on remittances. According to estimates from the Inter-American Dialogue think tank, remittances represent 22 percent of El Salvador’s gross domestic product, while in Guatemala and Honduras, they represent 123 percent and 20 percent, respectively. In comparison, in Mexico, in 2018, they only represented 3 percent of GDP (Manuel, 2019).

As a transit country, undocumented Central Americans have crossed Mexico since the mid-twentieth century. Just like the Mexican case, over time, migratory chains were created, which explain and maintain flows of migrants until today. Millions of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans live in the United States today, as shown on the map.

<sup>1</sup> Article 11 of Mexico’s Constitution establishes the right of freedom of movement and its limitations, as well as the bases for the right to refuge and political asylum.

MAP 1  
CITIZENS OF CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES RESIDING IN THE U.S. (2015)



SOURCE: *Atlas de la migración en los países del norte de Centroamérica.*

The vulnerability of these migratory flows increased when criminal gangs, including Mexico's drug cartels, began to see them as a substantial business opportunity. The reports of kidnappings, extortion, and extreme violence that migrant men, women, and children have suffered are innumerable. In 2011, Mexico's National Human Rights Commission issued its *Informe Especial sobre Secuestro de Migrantes en México* (Special Report on Kidnappings of Migrants in Mexico), which documents the magnitude of this terrible situation, the impunity that the criminals responsible enjoy, and the human tragedy suffered by their victims and their families and acquaintances (CNDH, 2011).

Mexico has also been a destination country for Guatemalan families as temporary migrants. These are agricultural laborers who come every year to harvest coffee, sugarcane, and bananas in the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, and Oaxaca. In recent years, workers from those countries have consolidated

their presence on the Maya Riviera, an area that has rapidly and extensively developed tourism.

## **The Caravans, a Watershed**

In November 2018, what has been called “the caravan” that originated in Honduras, changed Central Americans’ traditional form of emigrating. At that time, families organized to travel together instead of the traditional emigration of small groups, mainly men with a smaller number of women, children, and unaccompanied adolescents.

The caravan began its journey in San Pedro Sula, considered one of the world’s most dangerous cities. The contingent was formed with the support of human smugglers, civil society organizations, and individuals who spontaneously decided to join in when they found out it was forming.

Along the way to the Mexican border, families from El Salvador and Guatemala joined the caravan, which grew to no fewer than 7000 people. They forced their way across Mexico’s southern border after a failed attempt by authorities to stop them; they then traveled through Mexico toward the northern border, awakening enormous political and media interest, catching the eye of media from around the world.

Mesoamerican emigration cannot be understood in its appropriate context without including the United States. As previously mentioned, almost all Mexican and Central American migrants want to enter the United States. An enormous amount of literature has been produced on this subject. Given the space limitations here, suffice it to say that the geographic proximity of the world’s largest labor market and the economic asymmetry between the United States and these migrants’ countries of origin inevitably turns the former into a point of attraction for millions of migrants seeking a better life.

In the period we are dealing with, it is indispensable to mention the main characteristics of the restrictive, exclusionary, discriminatory immigration policy imposed by President Donald Trump. No other U.S. president in memory has positioned this issue as the center of his electoral victory and now, at the center of his fight for reelection in 2020. A Gallup poll from the first half of July 2019 states that 27 percent of those interviewed thought that the most important problem facing the United States is immigration (Jones, 2019).

Three counterposed situations coincide in time: in the north, the U.S. president who makes his anti-immigrant discourse the axis of his reelection campaign; in the center, Mexico's president, whose vision of migration has a social vocation that puts the premium on human rights and economic development in place of measures of dissuasion and contention; and, in the south, three countries of the Central American isthmus that are going through a systemic crisis of extreme poverty and criminal violence.

## **Donald Trump and Migration**

As pointed out above, almost all Mexican and Central American migrants want to enter the United States. One of the main characteristics of Donald Trump's administration is its exclusionary policy toward foreigners in general, but with a clear emphasis on undocumented migrants and those who try to enter through the border with Mexico.

His constant attacks on Mexico, the common border, and the restrictive regulatory changes both for migrants and for asylum seekers break with the history of U.S. immigration policy. Understanding the reasons why the U.S. electorate supported Trump is a political necessity, since it is the expression of a hidden change in the social, civic, and political structure that until now had prevailed in U.S. democracy.

When the former businessman announced his intention of running for the presidency in June 2015, he centered his discourse on accusations against migrants, calling them "criminals, rapists, bad hombres." He offered to build "an enormous wall" along the entire border with Mexico and accused the Mexican government of laughing at the United States and said that migrants were "killing the economy" (*Time* staff, 2015).

These positions simply continued during the rest of his campaign and became public policy once he was elected. One of Trump's first acts was to sign two executive orders regarding immigration policy. The first aimed to "deport in a swift, consistent, humane way" people detained on the southern border and ordered the design and immediate construction of the border wall (Armendaris, 2018).

The second order was even harsher than the first: under the pretext of safeguarding the country's national security, he declared that all "non-citi-

zens” represented a threat and every available legal means should be used against them.

The application of restrictive immigration measures extended to the policy and regulations adopted to ensure an unprecedented limitation on the number of asylum applicants and toughened the criteria to be able to qualify for asylum. While in 2015, almost half of refugee applications were granted, beginning in 2016, the percentage of those denied asylum has gradually risen to 65 percent in 2018 (TRAC, 2019), at the same time that the total number of applications increased.

Also, Salvadorans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, and particularly Mexicans, face even less likelihood of success. For example, during fiscal year 2018, only 23.5 percent of applicants from El Salvador were granted asylum; in the case of Mexicans, the percentage plummeted to 14.5 percent.

TABLE 1  
ASYLUM APPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES (FY 2018)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of Applications</i>	<i>Percentage of Applications Granted</i>
All Nationalities	42 224	35.0%
El Salvador	8232	23.5%
Honduras	6240	21.2%
Guatemala	6052	18.8%
Mexico	5379	14.5%

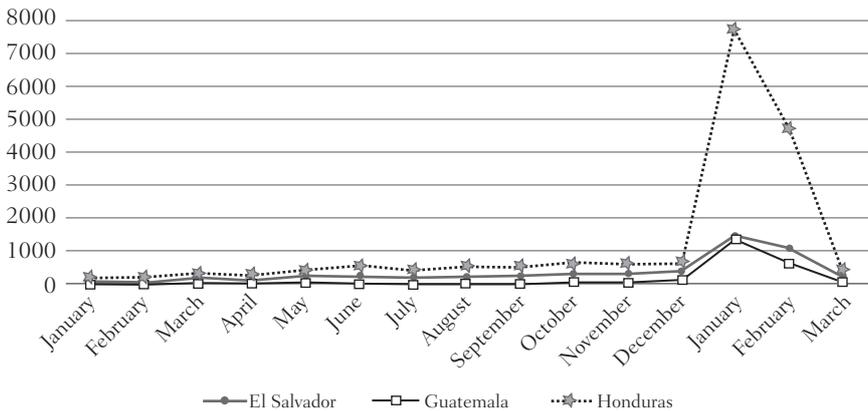
SOURCE: Developed by the author using information from TRAC (2019).

### **Mexican Immigration Policy: Trial, Error, and a Return to Reality**

In December 2018, in the early days of the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, his administration opted for a shift in the way it would deal with the growing number of contingents organized in caravans. Its premise —naïve, and, as was later shown, mistaken— was that Mexico would welcome the immigrants, respect their human rights, and even offer them work.

In the absence of a legal category that could specifically deal with the conditions of these undocumented migrants, the National Migration Institute (INAMI) was instructed to give those who requested it the status of “Visitor for Humanitarian Reasons,” recognizing their right to remain and even work in Mexico for a year with the possibility of renewing that status.<sup>2</sup>

GRAPH 2  
VISITOR FOR HUMANITARIAN REASON CARDS (2018-FIRST QUARTER OF 2019)



<sup>2</sup> Article 52 of the Migration Law states, “*Foreigners may remain in Mexican territory as visitors, temporary residents, and permanent residents as long as they fulfill the requirements established in this Law, its Regulation, and other applicable legal ordinances, in accordance with the following: . . . V. VISITOR FOR HUMANITARIAN REASONS. This condition for remaining will be authorized for foreigners who fulfill any of the following criteria: a) Having been the offended party, the victim, or witness to a crime committed inside Mexican territory. For the effects of this Law, regardless of what other applicable legal statutes establish, the individual will be considered the offended party or a victim if he/she is the passive object of criminal conduct, regardless of whether the perpetrator of this action is identified, apprehended, tried, or condemned and regardless of the family relationship that may exist between the perpetrator and the victim. The offended person, victim, or witness of a crime who is authorized to remain in the country as a Visitor for Humanitarian Reasons will be authorized to remain in the country until the legal proceedings are terminated; when said proceedings finish, he/she must leave the country or request his/her status be renewed with the right to enter and leave the country as many times as he/she desires and with permission to work in exchange for payment in the country. Later, he/she may request the status of permanent resident; b) Be an unaccompanied little girl, little boy, or adolescent, in the terms established in Article 74 of this Law; c) Be an applicant for political asylum, refugee status, or complementary protection from the Mexican State, until his/her migratory situation is resolved. If the application is granted, he/she will be given the status of permanent resident in the terms established in Article 54 of this Law. The Ministry will also be empowered to authorize the condition of visitor for humanitarian reasons to foreigners who do not fit into the preceding categories, when a humanitarian or public interest cause exists that makes their entry into the country or the regularization of their migratory status necessary; in this case, they will have permission to work in exchange for payment.*”

Encouraged by federal officials, state and municipal governments offered the caravans food and lodging in improvised shelters, transportation, protection, and accompaniment while they were in their jurisdictions. This practice was repeated state by state until they reached the border cities of Northern Mexico, where their inability to cross into the United States began to create problems of insecurity, under-employment, lack of public services, unsanitary conditions, and outbreaks of xenophobia.

Mexico's Ministry of the Interior (Segob) adopted a triumphalist, naïve tone when it said on December 12, 2018, "In five days the new federal government had resolved the issue of the caravans" that had arrived in Mexico a few days before. This says a great deal about the lack of a solid understanding of what was only natural that would happen: that the pressures in Central American countries for expelling their nationals are structural, derived from their extreme poverty and levels of violence.

Around February of the following year, in the face of the continued flow of migrants traveling in groups, the Ministry of the Interior accused the non-governmental organization Peoples Without Borders of recruiting the caravans.

By the end of March, after a meeting between the Segob and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Mexico's National Migration Institute stopped massively issuing Visitor for Humanitarian Reasons cards, restricting them exclusively to fully justified cases and limiting their duration to six months. Simultaneously, conflicts erupted in the migratory stations in the southern part of the country, with riots, escapes, and even a fire set by Cuban migrants in custody.

Given the increase of escapes and clashes between migrants in these stations and authorities, the Segob stated in May, "Despite the government's humanitarian vocation, no further violence will be tolerated."

In conclusion, one working hypothesis is that the Mexican government's new position about irregular migration, comparing it in practical terms to an open-door policy, fostered the arrival of more caravans, and the subsequent change, an attempt to once again restrict irregular entry into the country, has sparked outbursts of violence and discord among the migrants, who do not understand the reasons for the change. Supporting this hypothesis is the fact that Minister of the Interior Sánchez Cordero herself recognized on May 11 that the migrants believed that the IMAMI card "was a safe-conduct to enter the United States."

It is important to have an explicit record of the changing official policies the Mexican government was forced to put forward, both for domestic reasons and due to pressure from the U.S. government. Therefore, what follows are the verbatim public statements by Minister of the Interior Olga Sánchez Cordero in this regard:

**October 20, 2018.**

We're going to give out work visas; we're going to build the Maya Train, the Trans-isthmus Train; we're also going to plant four million trees; we're going to give jobs to our Mexicans and the migrants who come into our country with the idea of also building something important for Mexico.

**December 12, 2018.**

The immigrant caravan issue in Tijuana is no longer an issue. And you've seen that because in five days of this administration, we've been able to solve the problem. . . . The United States was impressed. . . . They've not seen a humanitarian crisis [develop].

**January 7, 2019.**

Anyone who wants to cross Mexico by coming across the southern border will have to fill in an entry application, in which, in addition to providing their personal data, they will have to show a personal identity document if they have one, as well as provide fingerprints and a photograph of their face.

Those who do this paperwork according to Mexican law will be guaranteed an immediate response to their request within seventy-two hours of making it, except in those cases in which more information about the applicant is required.

For migrants whose intent when entering Mexico is to transit toward the United States, the policy will be to keep their stay and mobility within certain periods so that, if need be, they can return to their countries of origin if they cannot enter the territory of our neighbor to the north.

**February 28, 2019.**

We have identified the leaders of the non-governmental organizations that are recruiting these caravans; concretely some of them are from Peoples without Borders.

**March 27, 2019.**

To guarantee that this flow of migrants continues and to ensure that illegal migration does not skyrocket, immigration installations will be set up in the thinnest

strip of land in our country, the 200 kilometers of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, with the participation of the Federal Police and Civil Protection officials.

An express lane will also be opened up to allow those foreigners who are part of circular migration to proceed without hindrance and in a regular fashion, in addition to the fact that humanitarian visas will no longer be distributed massively but rather, temporary visitors and work permits will be given out in the entire southeastern part of the country.

### **March 27, 2019.**

With regard to the meeting yesterday with Krijsten Nielsen, the U.S. secretary of homeland security, the [Segob] official announced that Mexico was suspending “massive” distribution of humanitarian cards for migrants and ensured that the government was seeking to bring order to migrants’ journeys.

### **April 1, 2019.**

The Ministry of the Interior stated that Mexico, instead of stopping them, will regulate their progress, because President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has given clear instructions to register all migrants for human rights reasons, starting with their right to an identity.

With regard to the U.S. president’s threat that he will close his border in retaliation for Mexico not having contained the flow of migrants, she insisted that “We have to regulate our border.”

### **April 23, 2019.**

With the growing flow of migrants in the country, Minister of the Interior Olga Sánchez Cordero called on Central Americans and citizens of other nations to respect Mexican laws and authorities and accept being registered as a precondition for deciding the nature of their stay in Mexico.

With regard to the comment she had made that “the mother of all caravans” made up of 20 000 people from different countries would meet up on its way to Mexico, she said that this caravan did not materialize, but that, nevertheless, since then, six caravans, which she called “little mother caravans,” had formed and each was made up of more than 2000 people.

Sánchez Cordero said that “Mexico has not caused the migration from Central America and other countries, but we are determined to give it our full attention.”

### **May 11, 2019.**

Despite recognizing that an unprecedented wave of migrants from different parts of the world has arrived in Mexico, Minister of the Interior Olga Sánchez Cordero underlined that this is not a humanitarian crisis. She did, however, warn foreigners that violence will not be tolerated inside the country.

With regard to the federal government's humanitarian visa, she added that it is merely an instrument that is part of the process of inclusion in the country but that they [the migrants] believed that it was a safe-conduct to enter the United States.

### **Initial Reflections<sup>3</sup>**

Every social phenomenon requires time for analysts to be able to assess and understand its origins, causes, development, and, above all, its consequences. For that reason, this chapter must be understood as a first approximation to explaining the phenomenon, understanding it, and evaluating the lessons it has left both for Mexico and for Central America and the United States as well.

All of this notwithstanding, however, we can say that the arrival in Mexico of the first contingent in November 2018, followed by several more, was the beginning of a new stage in human mobility toward the United States in the Mesoamerican region.

The size of these transit flows toward the U.S. border has reached unprecedented numbers: no fewer than 300 000 migrants were detected by Mexican authorities in the first months of 2019. By June, the figure reached almost 500 000 (Sánchez, 2019).

Mexico has a long tradition that characterizes it as a country of migrants. For almost a century, millions of citizens left their communities to emigrate temporarily or definitively to the United States. We can say that no other issue on the very long bilateral agenda has greater impact and consequences for the societies of both countries.

Millions of nationals from Central America, in particular from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, have also crossed Mexico's southern border. The vast majority of them have moved through Mexico to enter the United States, also irregularly.

Mexico's southeastern states are also destinations for thousands of families, mainly from Guatemala, who work in harvesting coffee and banana fields and fruit orchards.

<sup>3</sup> The issue examined in this article has also been the subject of multiple analyses, news articles, and reports; the author is a regular columnist for the Mexican daily *Excelsior* (Mohar, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019f, 2019g, and 2019h)).

But the caravans represented a fundamental shift in the Mexican migratory experience. Neither immigration and refugee authorities, the legal framework in which they work, nor society is prepared to respond in an orderly, efficient way to this new form.

It is noteworthy that this is going on only a few years after the European Union was shaken by the arrival of millions of migrants and asylum seekers from Northern Africa and the Middle East. There are those who think that this social phenomenon has become a pattern for the emergence of extreme nationalist, radical political groups and organizations with clear racial bases that have joined the attack suffered by the West's liberal democracies. Taking into consideration the obvious differences between the Central American caravans and those cases, they are the equivalent in the North and Central American regions.

Many questions come to mind that deserve concrete answers in the immediate future and others over the years to come:

- What will the political, economic, and social repercussions of the caravans be in Mexico, the United States, and their countries of origin?
- How should Mexico deal with this enormous, complex humanitarian challenge?
- How will the relationship between Mexico and the United States be affected after the U.S. elections?
- Will the caravans be the beginning of a structural change in the migratory experience in the region?
- At this writing, these unprecedented movements of people gave rise to a serious disagreement between the U.S. and Mexican governments. The obligations accepted by the Mexican government *vis-à-vis* the Trump administration compel it to reconsider its migratory policy. Among many others, the following questions require an answer:
  - Is this the beginning of a new historic stage in how undocumented migrants will be treated, not only those who come from the “Northern Triangle” of Central America, but from anywhere else in the world, who come to Mexico with the intention of traveling to the northern border?

- Will Mexico become a destination country for important numbers of foreigners who want to reside in our country?
- Will Mexico establish a permanent contention policy along its southern border through the deployment immigration agents, public security officers, armed forces, and a physical infrastructure that dissuades, makes more difficult, or impedes undocumented migrants' crossings?
- For the first time in its history, will Mexico's current government and its successors establish physical barriers of dissuasion and contention along its 1149-kilometer southern border?
- The Mexican Commission of Aid for Refugees (COMAR), an institution pointed to with pride in the 1980s when it set the example in the way it received, organized, and supported tens of thousands of Guatemalan refugees, is no longer even a shadow of its former self. The budget Mexico's Congress earmarked for it is dramatically low to be able to deal even with middling efficiency with the tens of thousands of refugee applications not only from the three aforementioned countries of Central America, but also from Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba.
- The structure and functions of the National Migration Institute (INAMI) and the COMAR must be analyzed. What model should be designed to adapt them to the new, foreseeable scenarios described above?
- In the short term, it is to be expected that Donald Trump will demand that Mexico's government strengthen its containment policy toward undocumented migrants who are trying to get to the United States. What concession or migratory agreement should the Mexican government demand in exchange for taking on this grave responsibility?
- Undocumented Mexicans residing in the United States are under permanent threat of expedited removal when identified by U.S. authorities. Should Mexico negotiate, demand, or bring litigation in U.S. courts for the respect for human rights and consular protection and even find a solution that recognizes them as families and individuals who contribute to the well-being of the U.S. economy?
- Specifically, should it not demand that the U.S. executive and Congress solve the problem of young people who were taken, undocumented, to the U.S. as children (known as the Dreamers) and give them legal status as immigrants?

- The Central American governments and oligarchies see in the emigration of their nationals a solution for their domestic poverty and unemployment problems. At the same time, they have benefitted from the arrival of millions of dollars in remittances sent by their citizens from the United States. Should Mexico and the United States negotiate with those governments to promote the legal reforms that would lead to beginning the long process of creating real rule of law, equity, and justice for all their inhabitants?

### **First Lessons Learned**

The following is a list of some of the lessons learned initially, not only for Mexico, but for the Mesoamerican region and the United States:

- A note of caution should be introduced here. When this essay was being written, a swift succession of unexpected events took place: President Trump used the arrival of the Central Americans to strengthen his anti-immigrant discourse with his political base and attack the Democrats for being “weak” and not supporting him with the funds he needed for building his “wall.”

He threatened Mexico with imposing tariffs on its exports if it did not take effective or immediate action to radically decrease the arrival of the caravans to its border. The Mexican government acquiesced and adopted enormously important policies that demand a new migratory strategy that can reconcile the safeguarding of its borders, human rights, the relationship with its neighbors to the south, and its arrangement with the U.S. government.

- Mexico cannot be understood without including the impact that international migration has had on its development from the beginning of the twentieth century until today.
- It is no exaggeration to say that it is a country of migrants: one out of every eleven Mexicans resides in the United States; remittances are a fundamental resource for the subsistence of millions of families; and

almost 500 000 qualified Mexican professionals participate in the U.S. labor market.

- Mexico's geographic location makes it a "bridge" to the world's largest labor market. Millions of migrants of many different nationalities cross through our territory. This crisis must teach us that a priority, strategic task for all governments in the world is to appropriately manage their borders. Mexico has been remiss and careless about its southern border, as informality, illegal statuses, insecurity, and the lack of basic infrastructure prevail.
- This has been made clear with the massive arrival of migrants who have had little difficulty in entering Mexico, despite failed attempts to contain them by the Mexican authorities.
- For many years, different Mexican administrations maintained that their nationals leaving for the United States was almost "a right," since our workers were indispensable for our neighbor to the north's economic development.

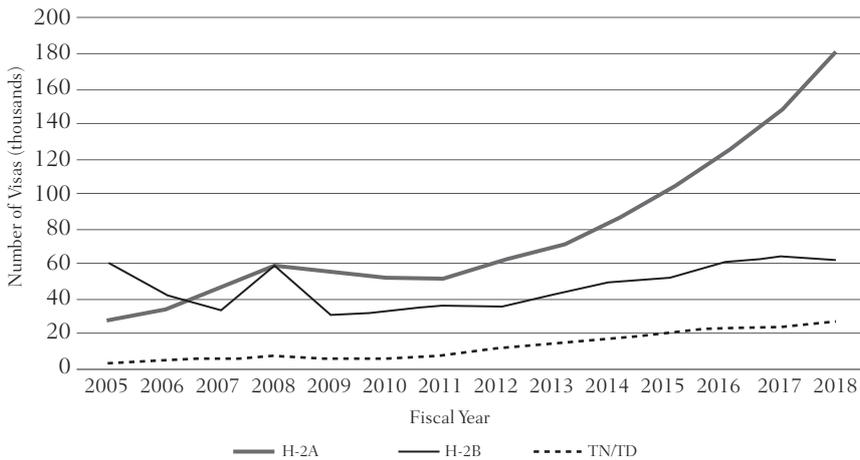
In reality, this exodus jibed very well with the interests of a political system incapable of offering decent jobs that would have kept those migrants in their places of origin; the remittances they have always sent have been critical for the subsistence of millions of families marginalized from the well-being and prosperity that segments of Mexican society enjoyed in recent decades.

- A combination of factors came together over several decades, such as the growing difficulty in crossing the U.S. border clandestinely, the increase in the price migrant smugglers charged, the relative improvement of the Mexican economy, and the aggressive, anti-immigrant environment that Trump has encouraged in the United States. All these have meant that Mexicans have taken advantage of the temporary work visas included in U.S. legislation, as can be seen in Graph 3.

While President Trump has made his anti-immigration policy the cross-cutting theme of his administration, regardless of his probable reelection, there are signs in U.S. society that indicate that tolerance levels

for undocumented migration will not change. If that is the case, the possibilities for hundreds of thousands of potential migrants from the Mesoamerican region and other parts of the world to integrate into the United States would be seriously affected. Mexico will be the country most affected by this.

GRAPH 3  
NON-IMMIGRANT VISAS ISSUED TO MEXICANS BY TYPE OF VISA  
(FYs 2005-2018)

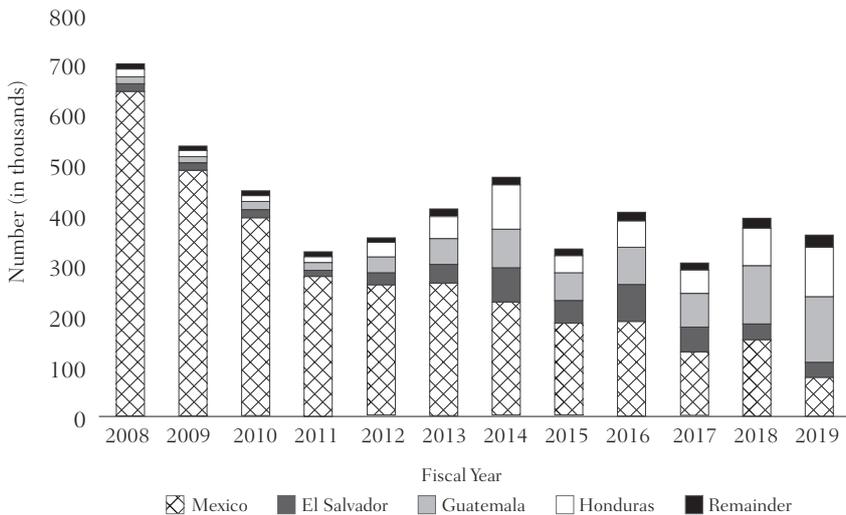


- Undoubtedly, Mexico’s relationship with the United States is by far the most important in its history. Being neighbors with the largest global power of the twentieth century puts us in a unique position. Despite this enormous asymmetry, the presidents of both countries have managed to establish a reasonable level of understanding with a certain degree of reciprocity and mutual benefits.
- Donald J. Trump’s arrival to the White House has been a harsh lesson. It forces Mexico to think about a strategic reconceptualization of its bilateral relations. The economic, social, and political changes taking place in that country will have long-term effects with unpredictable consequences. Mexico will be able to benefit only if it knows

how to interpret them and act intelligently and in a timely fashion. Regional human mobility must be part of that calculation.

- Undocumented migration of Mexicans will gradually become a lesser problem, the inverse of that of Central Americans. The lesson is that the entire world is being shaken by the challenges the arrival of huge numbers of immigrants poses to receiving nations. Mexico will not be the exception.
- It is nothing short of ironic that when the number of undocumented crossings by Mexicans drops drastically, now the Trump government is complaining to the Mexican government about the arrival of Central American migrants, shown in Graph 4.

GRAPH 4  
 APPREHENSIONS BY NATIONALITY BY THE U.S. BORDER PATROL  
 (FY 2008-2019)

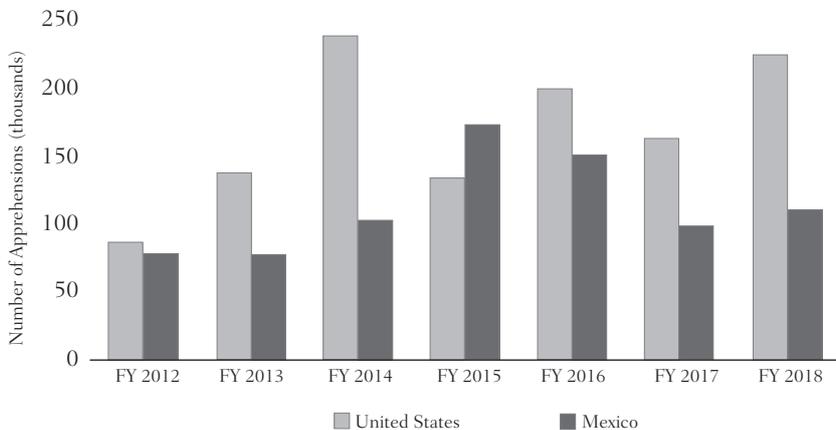


- For the first time in the history of migration from Mesoamerica to the United States, the Border Patrol is detaining more Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran nationals than Mexican authorities (see Graph 5).

- Little is known about the integrated labor market of the southern states in Mexico and the Central American countries. Tens of thousands of Guatemalans cross over the border with Mexico to work in different sectors of the regional economy: as domestic workers and in construction, different kinds of services, agriculture, tourism, etc. (see Appendix).

It took many years for Mexico to recognize this labor, social, and economic reality. It was not until 2008 that it legalized border crossings through permits designed to fit the diversity of activities, customs, and needs of that sub-regional market.

GRAPH 5  
APPREHENSIONS OF MIGRANTS FROM THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE IN MEXICO  
AND IN THE UNITED STATES (FYs 2010-2018)



SOURCE: Grupo de Estudio de Migración México-Estados Unidos, Migration Policy Institute (2019).

- The caravans may continue indefinitely; we must accept that the United States is not going to change its policy of rejecting and containing the Central Americans who arrive at its border requesting refuge.

The Mexican government's decision to receive in our territory those whose asylum requests U.S. authorities have agreed to study has been an extraordinary concession that is apparently unreciprocated (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019). If this commitment

continues, it is very probable that the number of returnees to Mexico will consistently increase and will reach into the thousands of adults and minors. Clearly, this brings with it an enormous responsibility *vis-à-vis* their custody, protection, and maintenance, and the economic resources this implies should be covered by the United States, or at least shared by the two governments.

- In some cities on both Mexico's southern and northern borders, the arrival and permanence of Central American migrants have sparked worrisome xenophobic reactions. We Mexicans do not know what it is to live with foreign communities. The National Migration Institute (INM) did a study of foreigners living in Mexico, according to which they made up not even 1 percent of the entire population; and, of those, 70 percent are from the United States (Coba and Rodríguez, 2012).
- The migratory crisis that Mexico could face for an indeterminant time teaches us that the governmental institutions in charge of applying immigration and refugee legislation must be strengthened.<sup>4</sup>
- A general lesson that Mexico must learn with the arrival of the caravans is that, sooner or later, neglecting to understand, analyze, and establish long-term policies to deal with obvious internal and international social phenomena like migrant flows will come at a high cost. Hopefully, not only the government, but also all of Mexican society will learn the lesson this time.
- Donald Trump's taking office as president has made for a radical transformation in his country's immigration policy. In an unprecedented fashion, he has made his anti-immigrant rhetoric, particularly targeting Mexicans, the centerpiece of his political campaign to consolidate the support of his electoral base.

<sup>4</sup> Both the National Migration Institute and the Mexican Commission for Helping Refugees (Comar) have historically been underfunded. Today, it is not sufficient to increase their budgets; they require structural re-engineering to allow them to deal with the new situation of migratory and refugee movement.

- The border with Mexico and the construction of the “magnificent wall” along the common border is an iconic part of this rhetoric. Many regulatory changes have altered the humanistic, inclusionary principles that were part of his country’s vision since it was created. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe this in more detail, which is why I have cited several studies that demonstrate it.
- In the long, complex migratory relationship between the two countries, in three years, Trump has eliminated the sustained efforts by both countries’ governments to collaborate in managing migration in an orderly, legal, safe way. The year 2019 will be remembered as the year in which the principle of “shared responsibility” was abandoned, a principle that both countries had accepted as the framework for managing their extensive agenda.
- Unilateralism, discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance have characterized the Trump administration’s immigration policy. This is a harsh lesson for Mexico and a central challenge for its current government.
- Imagination, firmness, and persistence will be required to defend Mexican migrants, particularly those who have resided for many years in the United States but do not have legal status. With Donald Trump in the White House, we should not expect any change in the coming years.
- It is abusive and ironic that Trump uses lies or half-truths about the arrival of Central Americans to his border to attack the Mexican government. It is ironic since, for decades now, the flow of undocumented Mexican migrants has decreased considerably; and it is abusive because it is making the Mexican government responsible for the arrival of an unprecedented number of migrants, but now from Central America.
- Mexico has underestimated the strategic importance of the Central American isthmus, not so much in economic or trade terms, but in political and social terms. The systemic crisis in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador —Nicaragua may fall into a crisis of governance— was predictable years ago. The expulsion of their inhabitants is sparked

not only for economic reasons, but also due to the terrible violence of the criminal gangs that have proliferated there.

- The United States bears co-responsibility for that violence and insecurity. Almost twenty years ago, it deported tens of thousands of gang members originally from those countries without any coordination, support, or even previous notice to the Central American governments. The Mara Salvatrucha and M18 criminal gangs have today reached the terrifying number of 45 000 members. It is a perverted manipulation for Trump to liken all Central American immigrants to these criminals.
- The enormous existing economic inequality in the Central American countries, in the economic oligarchies that dominate them, the volatility and weakness of their governments, the civil wars they have gone through all demand a profound transformation oriented to achieving a more equitable form of economic development and governance rooted in the rule of law.
- In May 2019, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced a Comprehensive Plan for the Development of Central America, designed with technical support from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2019). Its aim is to encourage investment that would gradually keep Central Americans in their countries by opening up a different option from that of emigrating to the United States. It is an ambitious proposal, and we will have to wait to see if the international community, financial agencies, civil society, and academia are able to translate these ideas into realities.
- For the time being, one lesson for Mexico and Central America is the U.S. government's immediate response: the miniscule amount of US\$40 million in official U.S. government aid for Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador was cancelled and that amount will now go to the Venezuelan opposition to the Nicolás Maduro government (Wilkinson, 2019).

## Appendix

### REGIONAL VISITOR AND BORDER-WORKER VISITOR

Up until April 23, 2019, regional visitor status was only available for nationals of countries on Mexico's southern border, that is, Guatemala and Belize; it allowed them to remain in some municipalities of the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, and Quintana Roo. This status, like that of border-worker visitor, was created in Article 52 of the Migration Law and is regulated in Articles 72 and 73 of the Guidelines for Migratory Processes and Procedures:

ARTICLE 52. Foreigners may remain in Mexican territory as visitors, temporary residents, and permanent residents, if they fulfill the requirements established in this Law, its Regulatory Statutes, and other applicable legal stipulations, in accordance with the following:

. . . III. REGIONAL VISITOR. This status authorizes the foreign national or resident of neighboring countries to enter and leave the border regions as many times as desired as long as their stay does not exceed seven days; it does not give them permission to receive payment in the country. The Ministry will establish administrative procedures to determine the duration of the authorizations, as well as the municipalities and states to be deemed border regions, for the effect of authorizing the status of regional visitor.

IV. BORDER-WORKER VISITOR. This status authorizes the foreigner who is a national of the countries that Mexico shares borders with to remain for up to a year in the states determined by the Ministry. The border-worker visitor will have permission to engage in paid employment in an activity related to the employment available and will have the right to enter and leave Mexico as many times as he/she desires.

### AGREEMENT TO REFORM THE GUIDELINES FOR MIGRATORY PROCESSES AND PROCEDURES (*FEDERAL OFFICIAL GAZETTE*, APRIL 2019)

On April 23 this year, the *Federal Official Gazette* published the Guidelines for Migratory Processes and Procedures, which extends the right to obtain the status of regional visitor to nationals of El Salvador and Honduras and also broadens the geographical area they are valid in to all the municipalities of the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, and Quintana Roo, and adds the state of Yucatán.

SOLE ARTICLE. – Articles 72, 73, and 74 of the Guidelines for Migratory Processes and Procedures are AMENDED to read as follows:

ARTICLE 72. This status can be authorized for nationals of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras, as well as those foreign individuals residing permanently in the aforementioned countries.

ARTICLE 73. For the effects of this chapter, the border region will be defined as all the cities and municipalities of the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán.

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