Central American migration, remittances and transnational development

Ninna Nyberg Sørensen

Introduction

In recent years, the question of migration in general, and migration’s developmental impact in particular, has become an issue of heated public and scholarly debate. This is also the case for Central America, where the costs and benefits of migration have become matters of national and, to a lesser extent, regional policy discussion. Central American migration within and beyond the region encompasses a broad range of experiences with important effects for social, political and economic governance. It poses severe challenges to the individuals and communities involved as well as to migration scholars and policy-makers conventionally dividing migratory practices into neatly fixed compartments with distinct development effects: internal, regional or international; cyclical, temporary or permanent; voluntary/involuntary or economically/politically motivated; driven by push factors in the countries of origin, pull factors in the countries of destination, or processes of transnational community formation. The lines of demarcation are rarely clear-cut anywhere and nor are they in Central America. To measure the effects of migration on development, it is important to understand how migration is regulated and organized by a plurality of (f)actors, as this review of Central American migration sets out to do.

The chapter examines the broader migration flows in the region, in particular those of Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. For historical contextualization, I start out by providing a brief historical overview. I argue that in many ways current migration patterns should be seen as a continuation of older practices rooted within colonial and capitalist developments as well as specific community or family structures. During the 20th century, political upheaval and armed conflict in some countries transformed traditional labour migration into massive displacements to other Central American countries, Mexico, the USA and Canada. From the brief historical overview I turn to more current trends. I show that the volume of international migration has increased dramatically over the last three decades as has a growing dependence on remittances.

Throughout the chapter I employ a transnational analytical lens. I consider the main drivers of international migration that at face value would seem to lend themselves to either political or economic explanations. The armed struggles may have ended, but none the less I argue that
contemporary international migration, in particular from the Northern Triangle, is rooted in both economic and societal insecurity factors. I go on to discuss the transformation of Central American migrants from hermanos lejanos (distant brothers) to hermanos cercanos (close brothers) to migrant superheroes through the extensive focus on their remittance-sending capacity. Although migrant transnationalism from below often is forwarded in migrant-centred analyses of the region, including my own, in this essay I argue that the redefinition of migrants as ‘partners in national development’ lately has been accompanied by migration prevention rhetoric and practice following from more recent attempts at control and containment (what Peutz and De Genova 2010 have termed the ‘deportation regime’ as shorthand for the latest development in neo-liberal migration governance). As argued by Baker-Cristales, the ‘contradiction’ between migrants’ formal exclusion and informal influence through remittances shapes ‘an emergent regime of transnational governmentality’ from above (2008: 349). The latter part of this chapter is dedicated to discussing such emergent forms of transnational migration-development governmentality in Central America.

Historical overview

Migration is an enduring feature of Central American history. It has been traced back to colonial expansion as well as to later internal and international migration patterns caused by political violence and economic crisis (Hamilton and Stolz Chinchilla 1991). Until the 1970s, these migrations were generally characterized by internal or regional movements of a trans-border, bi-national and temporal character with the purpose of sustaining local livelihoods (Morales Gamboa et al. 2011). However, the armed conflicts in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala changed this pattern, first and foremost by causing massive forced displacements due to political violence during the second half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Most of the people affected by this became internally displaced, while others found refuge in neighbouring countries, and a few travelled to the USA, Canada or Europe. When peace accords were finally reached, one significant outcome was a massive return of Central American refugees (Castillo 2003). Others continued their transnational community formation by either staying in the countries of refuge or moving further on, paving the way for later social network-based labour movements (Hagan 1994; Castillo 2003).

As reiterated by Morrison and May (1994: 111), economic and political factors are not easily disentangled in Central American migration analysis. Rather, what emerges from the Central American migration landscape is a heterogeneous system consisting of internal, regional and international migrations, that has been driven by shifting structural conditions over time. Simultaneously, such differences have tended to converge and co-exist according to the relation between economic and political instabilities in the country of origin and the opportunity structures in the destination. Historically, labour mobility has constituted a constant in the region. The demand for temporal workers in plantations (agro-export sector), free trade zones, and processes of urbanization have been the drivers of internal migration. Trans-border migration has taken place in the four border regions of Guatemala–Belize, Guatemala–Mexico, Nicaragua–Costa Rica and Costa Rica–Panama, and as in the case of internal migration, has been driven primarily by a demand for temporary labour that over time has led to more permanent migration. Flight from political persecution has been another contributing factor. Extra-regional migration, nevertheless, has increased tremendously over the last 20 years. Mexico, the USA and Canada constitute the traditional destinations, but lately new destinations in southern Europe have attracted Central American migrants, in particular from Honduras (and previously from the Dominican Republic). Stricter migration policies have not
halted migration but have resulted in a steady increase in undocumented flows. Finally, and primarily due to its geographic location close to the USA, Central America has become a transit region for South American and extra-continental migrants. At the same time an increasing number of Central Americans spend prolonged periods in transit through neighbouring countries and Mexico on their journeys, often undocumented, northwards (Morales Gamboa 2011: 16–18).

**Current trends**

While migration is an enduring aspect of Central American livelihood strategies, the volume and dynamics have changed tremendously during the last decades. Armed conflict, political instability, human rights violations and natural disasters motivated Central Americans to migrate in the 1980s and early 1990s; continuing socio-economic problems and generalized violence are the main factors behind present movements. However, migration has not affected each of the Central American countries in the same way and to the same extent. The armed conflicts of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua have produced larger migration flows than have more stable countries such as Costa Rica and Panama, and within each country the conflictive zones have generated yet more migrants (Mahler and Ugrina 2006). When new conflicts occur—as in the case of the 2009 overthrow of Honduran President Zelaya—migration flows are instantly affected (Sørensen 2013).

Much current migration takes place within the region, first and foremost of Nicaraguans to Costa Rica, but also of Guatemalans and Salvadorans to Belize, resulting in a ‘Latinization’ of this country’s ethnic fabric (Woods et al. 1997). Almost 20% of current Central American migration flows are intra-regional, primarily from Nicaragua to Costa Rica, and from Guatemala to Belize and Mexico, but all Central American countries host nationals from other countries within the region (Morales Gamboa et al. 2011). In addition, as migration overland from South to North America has increased, Central America has become an important transit region. Lately, undocumented Asian and African migrants have begun to transit through the countries of Central America (UNHCR 2010).

With regard to international migration, the USA is the primary destination with a share of 70%–80% of Central American migrants. Currently, around 4.6m. Central Americans live in the USA of whom around two-thirds were born in Central America. Their numbers have increased rapidly in recent decades: between 2000 and 2009 the Central American migrant population doubled in more than 18 states as did the percentage of undocumented entries (Terrazas 2011).

Approximately 40% of all US-based Central American migrants are from El Salvador, followed by Guatemala (27.4%), Honduras (16.1%), Nicaragua (8.7%), Panama (3.6%), Costa Rica (3.0%) and (Belize 1.7%) (Terrazas 2011). The USA hosts almost as many Dominicans as Salvadorans, but Dominican migration over the past 20 years has diversified and by now includes several other important destinations. The relative importance of migration for Central American countries is indicated in Table 3.1.

Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala have official emigration rates varying between 9% and 16%. The real migration rates are probably much higher. Belize has almost as high immigration as emigration rates, whereas Costa Rica receives far more immigrants than it produces emigrants.

It is commonly estimated that more than 40% of the Central American population in the USA lack legal immigration status (some nationalities up to 60%) whereas another 10% reside under Temporary Protection Status (TPS).² Honduran and Nicaraguan migrants were granted TPS following the passage of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, and Salvadoran migrants following the 2001
Earthquakes. Currently, TPS beneficiaries from Central America include approximately 229,000 Salvadorans, 70,000 Hondurans and 3,500 Nicaraguans (Terrazas 2011). In a somewhat belated action, the Guatemalan Government requested TPS for their undocumented US migrant population following the 2010 volcanic eruption and tropical storm. The US Government has not yet officially denied this request, but has embarked on massive deportations of Central Americans, in particular Guatemalans and Hondurans (see Table 3.2).

The numbers given in Table 3.2 should be multiplied by two or three to provide an estimate of how many more Central Americans have been deported overland from Mexico. The socio-political ramifications of current mass deportations remain very much under-examined and insufficiently explored in the region.

The distinction between earlier refugee movements (motivated by fear) and post-conflict migrations (economically motivated) is difficult to maintain in Central America. More recent migrants no longer qualify for refugee status according to country of reception perceptions. They nevertheless often share several experiences with earlier pioneer refugees, in particular exposure to regime instability and increasing levels of insecurity and generalized violence. Annual homicide rates in countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are currently above those of the most violent years of armed conflicts (see Figure 12.1 in Chapter 12 and the discussion there). Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama have significantly lower crime and violence levels, yet a steady rise in crime has raised serious concerns (World Bank 2011a). While crime and violence often has been posited as an effect of deportation of criminal Central American youth gang members (Johnson 2006), the ready availability of firearms, weak criminal justice institutions and the local insecurities generated by this are contributing to high migration pressures. Other factors such as closing opportunities for personal development, blocked (if not

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**Table 3.1 Population and migration by Central American country, 2010**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total population</th>
<th>Total emigrants</th>
<th>emigrants (% of total population)</th>
<th>Immigrants (% of population)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belize</td>
<td>313,000</td>
<td>50,245</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>4,695,000</td>
<td>182,589</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>10.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>7,453,000</td>
<td>1,152,884</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>14,362,000</td>
<td>1,288,833</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>7,614,000</td>
<td>887,453</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>5,825,000</td>
<td>740,608</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>3,500,000</td>
<td>141,100</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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**Table 3.2 US deportation of Central American migrants by country, 2003–10**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>5,561</td>
<td>7,269</td>
<td>8,305</td>
<td>11,050</td>
<td>20,045</td>
<td>17,911</td>
<td>16,814</td>
<td>18,520</td>
<td>17,308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>7,726</td>
<td>9,729</td>
<td>14,522</td>
<td>20,527</td>
<td>25,898</td>
<td>22,670</td>
<td>20,746</td>
<td>23,068</td>
<td>30,313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>8,182</td>
<td>8,752</td>
<td>15,572</td>
<td>27,060</td>
<td>29,737</td>
<td>23,789</td>
<td>19,149</td>
<td>17,899</td>
<td>21,963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>947</td>
<td>1,292</td>
<td>2,446</td>
<td>2,307</td>
<td>1,862</td>
<td>1,478</td>
<td>1,347</td>
<td>1,495</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

downward) social mobility, the loss of jobs, and the need to find other ways to provide for family members further add to the picture.

While gangs doubtless contribute to crime in the Northern Triangle, the limited evidence available indicates that they are responsible for only 15% of homicides (World Bank 2011a). My own work in Guatemala and Honduras suggests that few current deportees have criminal records beyond being apprehended without proper documentation and that continued migration pressure partly is related to feelings of generalized insecurity and impunity at home (Sørensen 2011, 2013).

Regional similarities aside, national differences persist. Below, I sketch the more recent migration experiences of the four Central American countries with the highest absolute and relative migration rates.3

Nicaragua

Two countries dominate the migration flow from Nicaragua: Costa Rica receives over one-half of all Nicaraguan migrants, the USA the bulk of the remainder (Andrade-Eekhoff and Silva-Avalos 2003). This dual regional/international migration pattern developed during the 1970s and post-1979 period (Morales Gamboa et al. 2011). Migration towards the USA is considered strongly linked to Contra War activities whereas migration to Costa Rica often is understood as economically motivated (Lundquist and Massey 2005). In reality, Costa Rica granted asylum to far more Nicaraguans (Costa Rica recognized 46,000 Nicaraguan refugees compared to approximately 10,000 refugees who were granted asylum by the USA).

Manuel Orozco identifies five distinct waves of US-bound migration, beginning with the flight of Somoza supporters in 1979–81, followed by a second wave of middle-class Nicaraguans unaffected by the Sandinistas (1982–84). Both of these groups supported the Contras and suffered expropriation of their property prior to and after migration. A third wave of common citizens and Contra relatives—mostly lower-middle and working-class people—escaped the civil war at its highest point (1985–89). The fourth wave (1990–97) migrated in response to President Violeta Barrios Torres de Chamorro’s structural adjustment policy that exacerbated poverty and political instability. The final wave (1998 to the present day) is migrating in response to the devastating effects of Hurricane Mitch and continuing economic instability (Orozco 2008).

Large-scale migration to Costa Rica was a direct effect of the 1972 earthquake that destroyed the capital, Managua. It was followed by the 1970s civil war and continued on into the 1980s with the Sandinista Government and the Contra War. During these tumultuous years, many middle-class Nicaraguans sought refuge in Costa Rica (Mahler and Ugrina 2006). The larger flows have occurred from the 1990s to the present, now mainly consisting of men and women from Nicaragua’s rural areas who find employment in Costa Rica’s agricultural, construction and manufacturing sectors (men) and in domestic service (women) (Orozco 2008). Motivation factors aside, Nicaraguan migrants in the USA are more likely to have an urban background, be wealthier and better educated, or come from the northern departments of Nicaragua. Those heading for Costa Rica tend to be from the southern (bordering) areas of the country, be more likely to have rural backgrounds and have fewer economic resources (Andrade-Eekhoff and Silva-Avalos 2003).

Guatemala

A similar pattern is found in Guatemala where high rates of emigration equally are related to political instability, natural disasters and a lack of economic opportunity (Sørensen 2011). The 1960–96 armed conflict led to massive displacements to Mexico, other neighbouring countries,
the USA and Canada. Only a minority were officially recognized as refugees. Many Guatemalans returned from Mexico once the war was over, but very few from the USA and Canada (Stepputat 1999). US-bound migration recorded a significant rise following the 1976 earthquake and has increased ever since. Seasonal migration to southern Mexico continued after the war, and is officially said to include around 50,000 migrants per annum (primarily male workers), but generally is believed to include four to five times more undocumented migrants, some in transit towards the USA (Smith 2006).

Estimates of current Guatemalan migration flows vary slightly between 1.2m. and 1.5m., including undocumented flows. The USA remains the primary destination, where up to 60% of Guatemalan migrants may be undocumented. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 70% of the Guatemalans in the USA are male and primarily employed in the services sector, manufacturing and agriculture (IOM 2005). Young women (including single mothers) have recently joined the migration flows (Ugalde 2010). Other women are left behind in Guatemala, where they have become known as viudas blancas (white widows), often suffering from control by their husbands abroad, or their in-laws, and occasionally abandonment.

Guatemalan migration has an important ethnic dimension. It involves all ethnic groups and social classes but, since the civil war primarily targeted indigenous Maya communities, distinct indigenous migration patterns developed, for example of Chujes, Quichés and Kanjobales in Los Angeles, Mayans from Totonicapan and Quiche in Houston, and Kanjobales in Southern Florida (Burns 1993, Hagan 1994). Historical Garifuna migration—transcending national borders within Central America—has led to distinct migrant communities in New York and Los Angeles (Andrade-Eekhoff and Silva-Avalos 2003, Opie 2009). Current mass deportations, like those resulting from the raid at a meat packing plant in Postville, Iowa, in May 2008, show a similar ethnic division. In this particular case, more than 90% of the apprehended undocumented Guatemalan migrant workers had set out from indigenous communities in the department of Chimaltenango (Camayd-Freixas 2009).

Honduras

Honduran migration has received less scholarly attention than that of its neighbouring countries. Existing estimates of international migration vary widely and are subject to contestation. Cross-references to various ‘guestimates’ abound in official documents. The Honduran Government and local migrant organizations habitually quote a figure of 1.2m. This figure is also reported by the World Bank (Endo et al. 2010). Local media use the astonishing breakdown made by the Foro Nacional para las Migraiones en Honduras (FONAMIH—National Forum for Migration in Honduras), which calculates that 185,000 people leave Honduras each year (15,000 per month, 3,500 per week, 21 per hour) (FONAMIH 2008). The majority have migrated to the USA, some for neighbouring countries and Mexico, whereas Spain and Canada have become new long-distance destinations (Orozco 2007). More women than men are involved in the fairly new migration to Spain, a pattern that resembles that of Dominican in the 1980s who migrated through female networks for work in the domestic sector (Sørensen 2013). Total estimates are well beyond the numbers reported by the receiving states and as such attest to high rates of undocumented migration as well as repetitious attempts made upon deportation. FONAMIH estimates that less than 20% are likely to succeed during their first migration attempt. The figures also suggest a rapid transformation from being primarily a country of reception during the 1970s and 1980s (receiving more than 100,000 war migrants from Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala) to becoming a country of mass emigration, with the vast majority migrating within the last 15 years (Endo et al. 2010).
As in the case of other Central American migrations, the Honduran experience is linked to earlier periods of conflict that none the less never resulted in the migration of more than a few thousand people at a time. Throughout most of the 20th century the (limited) Honduran migration was connected to the ports to which Honduran products were shipped, for example New Orleans. Current mass migration patterns are linked to the structural adjustment packages and massive state corruption during the 1990s, state failure to reconstruct the country following the devastating effects of Hurricane Mitch, and subsequent augmentation of unemployment, poverty, inequality and insecurity (López Recinos 2005).

In comparison to the experiences of other Central American migrant groups, new Honduran migrants appear to have weaker links to earlier and more well-established groups in the USA. The substantial numbers of Hondurans who have fallen victim to human trafficking, abuse, abduction and even murder on their travels northwards, suggest that journeying migrants have to rely more on smugglers and other criminal migration actors than on well-established transnational social networks (Sørensen 2013).

El Salvador

Salvadorans (both the elite and poor peasants) migrated to the USA throughout the 20th century, but in limited numbers. Interestingly, working- and middle-class women became the protagonists of establishing social networks during the 1960s when they were recruited as domestic workers in the USA (Andrade-Eekhoff and Silva-Avalos 2003). Nevertheless, Salvadoran mass migration was born in the midst of the civil war (1972–92) that produced an exodus of an estimated 1m. migrants—one-sixth of the total population. The majority were working adults who left behind family members that needed their support (Mahler 1995). By 2008 the USA hosted about 1.1m. Salvadoran migrants, of whom only 340,000 were legal permanent residents (Terrazas 2011).

The Salvadoran war and post-war migration to the USA is perhaps the most studied experience owing to: (a) its magnitude; (b) the increasing dependence of El Salvador on migrant remittances, and (c) the Salvadoran state’s efforts to create linkages to its citizens abroad. Similarly to the other Central American countries, remittances play a significant role in the local economy, are the single most important source of foreign capital flow to the country, and have made successive Salvadoran governments transnationalize their polity.

According to Mahler (1995, 2000), the Salvadoran Government’s interest in the plight of its citizens abroad arose when the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed in 1986, seven years after the beginning of the war. Unable to absorb hundreds of thousands of deported migrants into a devastated war economy, El Salvador made a plea to the Reagan Administration not to undertake the deportation of undocumented Salvadorans. Similar pleas for extensions of TPS were made in subsequent years. In 1995 the Salvadoran Government assisted its citizens abroad to file political asylum petitions upon the announced termination of TPS; in 1997 the Salvadoran Government encouraged their citizens abroad to take advantage of the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act and sent representatives to Washington, DC, to lobby for more favourable immigration legislation vis-à-vis Salvadoran migrants (Baker-Cristales 2008). Such acts—arguing that its citizens abroad merited protection from deportation even if they had fled civil war and a lack of state protection at home—can only be explained by the fact that the Salvadoran Government needed their migrants to become legalized so that they could continue to send remittances (Mahler 2000), and that Salvadoran state-led transnationalism (Popkin 2003) and transnational governmentality (Baker-Cristales 2008) had begun to take hold on Salvadoran state practices.
Other Central American governments, in particular those of the Guatemala and Nicaragua, were rather late in following the Salvadoran example. Backed by international institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), United Nations Development Programme and IOM, the Guatemalan, Honduran and to a lesser extent Nicaraguan Governments began to put forward and promote migration as beneficial to local development in the mid-2000s, hoping simultaneously to secure an outlet for high unemployment rates and cultivating an inflow of continuous and increasing incoming remittances (Sørensen 2012).

Migration and development: Central America ‘remittanced’

Migration flows in one direction and remittance flows in the other have become a major emphasis in regional development analyses. Remittances sent back to Central America have grown tremendously over the last 30 years, reflecting the increase in migratory movements, improvement in data collection and reduction of transaction costs (see Table 3.3).5

Remittances are one of the most important sources of revenue for the local economies, ranging from 28% of the gross domestic product in Honduras to 17% in El Salvador, 12% in Nicaragua, and 9% in Guatemala (Orozco 2007). In 2010 approximately US $12,000m. was transferred by Central American migrants to their families back home. In absolute terms, Guatemala received the largest share, followed by Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua. In relative terms, El Salvador received the highest amount per caput, followed by Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Remittances have less significance in Costa Rica. The volume of remittances received in the region is indicative of transnational ties formed by migrants and family members still living in Central America. Although affected by the international financial crisis—resulting in job loss for thousands of Central American migrants—their growth rate remain steadier than other sources of foreign income.

According to a plethora of analyses made by the World Bank, the IDB, IOM, and other international institutions, the receiving of remittances is vital to Central American families. Such remittances save millions of people from the strains of poverty and reduce economic risk while providing a margin for survival (see for example Cheikhrouhoun et al. 2006; Endo et al. 2010). Additionally, their flow may be on a par with foreign direct investment (FDI) and far supersedes official development assistance (ODA), which has declined steadily in the region during the past 10 years.

In a context of state withdrawal of the responsibility to provide social services in both migrant-sending and -receiving countries, policies intended at ‘governing the flow of remittances’, ‘leveraging their impact on development’, ‘promoting financial inclusion of remittance senders and recipients’, ‘making partnerships with hometown associations and diasporas’, have

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<th>Table 3.3 Remittances by Central American country, 1980–2010</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belize</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
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<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
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<td>Guatemala</td>
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<td>Honduras</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
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<td>Panama</td>
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become popular tools for redirecting the gaze from global inequality, as well as international and local reluctance to change the status quo. However, recent critical analyses have shown that while remittances may have positive implications for growth and poverty reduction, the impact is modest, the redistributive effect is lacking, and their steady flow cannot substitute for sound development or public policies (Fajnzylber and López 2007; Blossier 2010). In addition, local criticism has revolved around the monetizing and instrumentalizing bias surrounding the production of knowledge about remittances, concentrating the research agenda excessively on financial aspects. Current mainstream positions ignore the social power relations that remittances destroy or build; the family micro-policy that they determine; the reduction on state actions that they encourage; and the sidestepping of any mention of the political and socio-economic conflicts in the societies where the remittances arrive (Rocha 2008).

Why so much interest in remittances, then? Primarily owing to increasing state dependence on their continuous flow. One way of securing this flow has been to celebrate the providers, for example by constructing the poor and economically expelled population as superheroes, as absent citizens who through remittances contribute to the daily survival of family members and the wider local community. Migrant superheroes do so through a moral obligation to take care of those left behind, thereby maintaining the role of provider and by implication restoring their public honour vis-à-vis the wider community and the state (Sørensen 2011). Baker-Cristales quotes the former Vice-President of El Salvador, Carlos Quintanilla Schmidt, who, during a speech delivered to a migrant organization in Los Angeles in 2002, argued that ‘we have opened the door so that you can enter the country … as heroes’. Such discursive reinterpretation and reincorporation of former adversaries earlier referred to as hermanos lejanos is central to ‘transterritorial nation-state building’ (Mahler 2000: 223). Other governments, particularly in Guatemala and Nicaragua, have mimicked the discourse but—in spite of much pressure from migrant organizations and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—have done very little to transform the hero image into concrete political action. Some reasons why this is so are discussed below.

**Transnational governmentality**

Much of the current Central American consensus regarding the impact of migration and development can be dated back to the 2005 *Human Development Report for El Salvador*. The report *Una Mirada al Nuevo Nosotros: El Impacto de las Migraciones* (UNDP 2005) acknowledged the importance of remittances and highlighted the emergence of a complex set of social and economic activities driven by migration. The report departed from the idea that El Salvador’s most important resource is its population. The analytical lens applied was transnational, but avoided hollow superhero rhetoric by acknowledging the social costs and hardships for the migrants involved. State action beyond ‘tapping into remittances’ was recommended, a recommendation not all Central American countries have been able to transform into pro-migrant policies.

Scholars concerned with the complex workings of transnational processes in Central America have applied the delineation of transnationalism from ‘below’ and ‘above’ suggested by Guarnizo and Smith (1998). Closer scrutiny of migrant- or state-driven processes shows that migrants pursue either individual or collective relationships with their countries of origin for a ‘variety of reasons, including the difficulties of obtaining economic security in either sending or receiving societies, racial and ethnic discrimination in the host society, and/or a desire to assist in the socioeconomic development of communities of origin often neglected by home governments or destroyed by civil conflict’ (Popkin 2003: 347). At times, home country states respond by
attempting to reincorporate nationals abroad into the national polity. Transnational social fields become consolidated in the context of interaction between the transnational practices of migrants ‘from below’ and the transnational engagement of sending country elites ‘from above’ (ibid.: 348).

The political and economic areas of concern that motivate Central American governments to incorporate their migrant population into the home country polity are summarized by Baker-Cristales (2008). They include economic integration, community integration, and cultural and educational relations. The first area is focused on state-promotion of business opportunities and marketing of local products abroad, but also includes the monetary effects of remittances on national balance of payment statistics. The second area concerns the ways to secure the participation of migrants in local development initiatives, in particular through institutional links to home town associations abroad. The last area revolves around the promotion of national identity and transnational cultural practices abroad as a way to secure long-term commitments and the existence of a loyal lobby for home-country national interests abroad. The extension of consular services falls in this area. A fourth, but underdeveloped, area entails programmes directed towards the attention to deported as well as voluntarily repatriated migrants. Currently, such programmes are often financed by international donors (as part of wider migration management strategies). Their low priority could well be explained by the fact that deported migrants lack any remittance potential.

In his comparative study of Salvadoran and Guatemalan migrant-state relations, Eric Popkin (2003) concluded that Salvadoran migrants and hometown associations had become incorporated into home country local development efforts to a larger extent than Guatemalan ones owing to a more developed organizational structure in the country and communities of origin. This is directly linked to differing levels of democracy, but ethnic division is another important factor. Salvadoran migrants have had a stronger, more numerous, and more ethnically similar nucleus of activists working in migrant associations abroad. Guatemalans, on the other hand, are divided between Ladino and indigenous populations, and as the few state-led programmes that exist have been aimed at leveraging migration for development as dictated by national elite interests, there has been less interest in establishing links to a primarily indigenous population abroad. Nevertheless, even in El Salvador, the institution of neo-liberal policies have limited the potential inclusion of migrants into the national political and economic processes, as has increased pressure by the US Government to curtail the flow of migrants (ibid.: 369–70).

The global expansion of neo-liberalism and the international expansion of markets and market relations are commonly evoked in critical migration-development analysis. An often overlooked factor is the commoditization of populations. Baker-Cristales builds on Aihwa Ong’s (2006) observation that neo-liberalism is not simply the attribution of state institutions in favour of market controls, but rather represents the creation of new modes of governmentality and novel technologies of governing and of disciplining populations, and on James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta’s (2002) concept of transnational governmentality to consider the dangers of commodification. She argues that migrant-sending nation states, as well as local and transnational NGOs carrying out state functions, are currently aiming ‘to subject transnational populations to tactics that nation-states have traditionally applied to their less mobile citizens’ (Baker-Cristales 2008: 351). Central American migrant NGOs create ‘stately power where it threatens to collapse’ but their actions often remain palliative as they fail to wrest much power from migrant-sending states. Although migration undoubtedly improves the lives of some people, it favours mobile capital much more than mobile people and ‘subjects the mobile [population] to undue risks and dangers, as well as to new forms of discipline’ (ibid.: 358). The dangers encountered by current undocumented Central American migrants on their journey northwards through Mexican
territory are just one crude example of this state neglect (Sørensen 2012, 2013). The neglect experienced by deported migrants when they step off the deportation flights in the countries they supposedly ‘belong to’ is another example that effectively subverts the myth of transnational inclusion. As I have argued elsewhere, state constructions of migrant superheroes and home-state rhetorical inclusion presuppose that national citizens remain abroad. Upon deportation the bulk of former heroes are stripped of transnational value and easily become ‘deportee trash’ over night (Sørensen 2011). The limits to trans-territorial nation state building become apparent when the agenda for neo-liberal transnational governmentality (understood as restrictive migration policy and rigid enforcement action) is firmly set by the northern migrant-receiving states. Under such conditions, the bargaining power of Central American states may rest less on their willingness to commodify their population (as migrant workers) and more on their ability to stall the number of deportations.

Conclusion

During the past 10–15 years, international organizations and governments in migrant-sending states have attempted to rhetorically link migration to development. In Central America, regional initiatives have sought to set a new migration-development agenda and generate policy ideas and practical proposals for governments and private decision-makers. In El Salvador efforts at trans-territorial nation state building and transnational governmentality have succeeded to a larger extent than in Guatemala and Honduras, where the embrace of migration-development policy has remained largely rhetorical. A divided migration pattern—and a divided power division on the national political scene—has made migration-development discussions more contagious in Nicaragua. One explanation for such differences may be found in the geopolitical relations with the USA prior to and during the armed conflicts; another explanation may have to do with the timing of extensive out-migration. While debate continues as to whether stricter border enforcement strategies have impeded the migration of hundreds of thousands Central Americans, one thing is clear: it becomes increasingly difficult to link migration and development without taking into account the dangers migrants encounter en route and the massive deportations they suffer. Yet, local aspirations and state rhetoric remain centred on continuing migration as the route to acute problem solving, progress, or national development. How do actual and aspiring Central American migrants react to that?

In assessing current development optimism and belief in remittances’ magical powers, José Luís Rocha (2008) quotes the many terms Latin American migrants use when referring to the money earned abroad and sent to their families back home: ‘Pisto, plata, lapas, tucanes, tejas, tostones, güevo, chichimosca, palos, tucos, fichas, hojas de repollo, barbas, luz verde, reales, búfalos, daimes, mermuz, chelines, chambulines, coyoles, chilcas, morlacas, maracandacas, harina, tablas, bollos, billuyos, verdes …’. Echoing other criticisms of remittance optimism from the region, Rocha goes on to argue that even if remittances reach the poor and can hugely stimulate the consumption capacity of a broad sector of inhabitants, abstracting them from the socio-cultural inter-relations in which they are generated, transferred and consumed, contributes to mystification and reductionism. Moreover, it serves to separate income from employment, thereby making migrants’ status as workers increasingly removed from their class status, which again reinforces a depoliticization and evaporation of political struggle.

As humour is the weapon of the weak it often contains everyday forms of resistance and resilience (Scott 1985). It bestows authority on moving subjects and holds the potential to subvert and/or reproduce authority, just as authority may be both a source and an effect of movement (Sørensen and Stepputat 2001). In contrast to Rocha, I therefore suggest that
Central American migrants, by nicknaming their hard-earned foreign currency, are quite aware of the multiple qualities of their remittances. They contribute to feed relatives (e.g. *pisto*, *tostones*, *harina*, *bollos*), to wealth, to building houses, and investing in livestock (e.g. *plata*, *tejas*, *búfalos*). However, their contribution is modest (e.g. *hojas de repollo*, *tostones*, *chichimosca*) and engaging in earning them is something of a game with high stakes (e.g. *fichas*, *chambulines*, *tablas*). The contradiction between the promises of overcoming poverty by migration and how unattainable migration has become to the large majority of Central American migrants reflects the tension between neo-liberal development discourse (based on free mobility of money and goods) and restrictive migration discourse (based on the control of human mobility).

Paradoxically, deportation of Central Americans apprehended while working at chicken plants, for example, in the USA (as was the case with the infamous 2008 Postville mass deportations) takes place at the same time as the Guatemalan fast food chain Pollo Campero expands its branches throughout the USA and elsewhere, partly driven by migrant demand for ‘nostalgic products’ from Central America. Transnational flows are never just one-way. As deportees begin to voice their discontent with hollow migration-development discourse and demand inclusion in national and transnational projects, new forms of political action may arise. Superhero rhetoric may be stripped of its disguise as may the weakness of states unable to provide social protection to their local, transnational and deported citizens.

Notes

1 The Northern Triangle refers to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (the three northern countries in Central America).
2 The USA has since 1990 offered TPS to national groups fleeing conflict or natural disaster in their homelands. Salvadoran migrants have benefitted from this programme since its inception.
3 Many more detailed studies exist, not least those made by local scholars and/or published by various Central American FLACSO institutions.
4 The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recognized Guatemalans as refugees in 1982. As many as 150,000 Guatemalans fled the country, of whom 46,000 were recognized and assisted by the Mexican Government. Of the recognized refugees, 90% were Mayan and 10% Ladino (Stepputat 1999).
5 Anecdotal evidence suggests that rising remittance levels also may contribute to money transfers connected to the drugs trade and extortion related to migrant kidnappings. See, for example, Puerta (2011).
6 To be a migrant superhero suggests the idea of a masculine universe and is expressed in highly gendered terms. Cultural constructions of migrant superheroes often clash with images of female migration as leading to family destruction, a point developed further in Sørensen (2011).
7 According to Pollo Campero’s website, the company currently has branches in Arizona, Boston, Chicago, Florida, Georgia, Houston, Los Angeles, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Plainfield and Washington DC, in addition to branches in neighbouring El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua and Mexico, as well as in Ecuador, Spain, Andorra, Bahrain, Indonesia and India. See: global.campero.com.

Bibliography

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