Migration, Poverty, Security and Social Networks: A Central American Perspective

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Abstract

This article provides a critical introduction to understanding the migration–poverty relationship from a different perspective, i.e. by focusing on the migration–livelihoods nexus from the point of view of social structures and people’s living conditions. The discussion presented here is based on analysis of different analytical approaches to migration in Central America and the Caribbean, developed within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR), an international research programme focusing on mitigating syndromes of global change. The present appraisal provides a broader explanation of the scope of relationships in the development of social life reproduction strategies, envisaging migration as an answer to problems of inequality and as a resource for poverty alleviation strategies, from a Central American perspective.

Keywords: Migration; poverty; development; livelihoods; security; borders.
27.1 The context

Central American countries are situated in the Caribbean Basin in the tropical part of the continent, between the two large continental masses of North and South America. These countries have a geographical proximity to the United States and have been marked by a strong dependency on the U.S. for two centuries, owing to this superpower nation’s foreign interventions and military invasions, which were aimed at maintaining its sphere of political and especially economic influence in almost all countries across the region.

The colonial past prior to U.S. influence also created differences between the mainland and insular territories. For instance, the Central American countries and Mexico, with the exception of mainland Belize, were Spanish colonies, along with Venezuela and, in the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Puerto Rico; the remaining Caribbean islands were colonies of other European powers until not very long ago. In this framework, the geopolitics and the historical conditions of each of these societies gave rise to the establishment of national borders after each process of independence. These borders reflect the political fragmentation of the region, the weakness of its economies and political systems, and the existing features of the capital cities in these countries (Barrera et al 2004).

Up until the last quarter of the previous century, military governments and conditions of political instability prevailed in most countries of the region. Formal democracies were established at the end of the Cold War, but in many cases governance was hampered by weakness of the new democratic institutions. In recent decades, social inequality has been shown to be responsible for continual social conflict, upheaval and guerrilla movements. Its manifestations encompass a set of extreme differences in the distribution of wealth and, in addition, other forms of exclusion and semi-slavery of the indigenous majorities and people of African descent, especially in certain societies ruled by small white elites. These societies have also been characterised by gender discrimination, as women are subject to patriarchal systems.

In the recent context of globalisation, in most Central American countries social, ethnic and gender asymmetries have become more pronounced. As a direct consequence, promises of welfare for both men and women, respect for human rights and hopes of social equality have been left behind. On the other hand, the region has become one of the main sources of new international migration flows. Central America and Southeast Asia are among the
main providers of migrant labour for both the recipient economies in the North and for labour markets within the same region. This movement of people and labour has led to the establishment of complex migratory systems with characteristics that interact with the structural deficiencies that drive them and, in turn, new political borders and social divisions continue to be established.

According to statistical reports available from and compiled by the Population Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Latin American and Caribbean countries account for over 12% of international migrants in the world and they make up nearly 4% of the regional migrant population (ECLAC 2006). The greatest number comes from Mexico, followed by the Caribbean Community and Colombia (with approximately one million emigrants in each case). Countries such as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua and Uruguay are nations with at least 8% to 15% of their population living abroad. Meanwhile, more than 20% of the Caribbean population is living outside their place of birth. More detailed data on immigrants and emigrants by country of residence and birth are given in Table 1.

In summary, the Central American and Caribbean region has been marked by processes of fragmentation, social polarisation and lack of governance. These conditions have caused a series of conflicts and political instability, and are among the causes that have generated heavy expulsion of population within a complex system of international migration. Far from resolving the structural and institutional weaknesses in the migrants’ countries of origin, this complexity tends on the contrary to aggravate these problems by adding new factors of instability, conflict and insecurity.5

### 27.2 Poverty and migration: new insights

Research findings compiled to date in the region within the framework of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South programme have provided a wealth of important results regarding the nexus of migration and poverty (Cedano and Dilla 2005; Dilla 2006; Morales-Gamboa and Pérez 2006; Hostettler 2007); analysis of migration – understood as a form of mobility that constitutes an expression of social practices articulated within the framework of globalisation (Sassen 2006) – rep-
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represents an important contribution to a better understanding of the relationship between the phenomenon of migration and the production of new livelihoods — conceptualised here as new fields of social reproduction within a transnational dimension. Nevertheless, certain conceptual limitations underlying this relationship are of significant concern. We discuss these limitations below.

27.2.1 The migration–development nexus

Social analysis of poverty and migration has become more common in Latin America, especially because of the emphasis placed on remittances as a resource for bridging gaps in the social system (Maimbo and Ratha 2005; Hostettler 2007). This approach seems to be an improvement, as it goes beyond the previous, rather negative, explanation of migration as resulting exclusively from the poverty of migrants and their families. So, although the rigidity of developmentalist thinking remains, studies of resources generated by migration as a means of overcoming poverty have introduced new discussions in many countries of origin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total population (in millions)</th>
<th>Immigrants a)</th>
<th>Emigrants b)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number (in thousands)</td>
<td>Percentage of population</td>
<td>Number (in thousands)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals for the region</td>
<td>523.463</td>
<td>6,001</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>3.925</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>11.199</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>8.396</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Salvador</td>
<td>6.276</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>11.225</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduras</td>
<td>6.485</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
<td>4.957</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>2.948</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>98.881</td>
<td>519</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>11.782</td>
<td>853</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 1

*Data on immigrants in El Salvador and Nicaragua are taken from the 1990 censuses.*

*Estimates of emigrants are minimum numbers, since they cover a limited number of countries in Europe and Oceania.*
The developmentalist approach has placed a very particular emphasis on migration, as it focuses on the effects of remittances in countries of origin. Kapur points out, for example, that “[a]s with the euphoria surrounding private capital flows in the mid-1990s, the attractiveness of remittances is in part a reaction to the failures of earlier development mantras” (Kapur 2005, p 339). In this regard, there is a clear link involving multiple dimensions of migration and development. However, the developmentalist approach applied to migration studies focuses on the assumption that resource flows from migrants could turn into potential assets that will allow societies of origin to overcome conditions of underdevelopment and poverty that gave rise to migration. Examples include remittances, social capital, and the development of productive skills. As Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen suggest: “we can see them [remittances] as a way to rectify years of uneven development” (Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen 2004).

As a consequence, the developmentalist approach to migration and remittances has avoided analysis of multiple factors that interact within the transnational social fields in which migrants are embedded and the interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices and resources are unequally exchanged, organised and transformed. Similarly, analysis of the strategies developed by migrants for management, transfer and use of resources obtained from migration – such as remittances – has been neglected. In this sense, the approach continues to ignore the social conditions under which such strategies are designed, on many occasions considering the migrant simply as *homo faber* or dollar-maker. In this scenario, an anthropological glance at the study of such linkages contributes to the acknowledgement of social networks as a key cultural resource that migrant people, families and communities have in developing new transnational livelihoods from migration (Lomnitz 2001).

From the point of view of this discussion, migration–development interactions should be studied from the analytical and methodological angle of inequality, rather than poverty. By contrast to the existing definition of poverty as a static condition, inequality in the proposed perspective is understood as a dynamic-relational category (Morales-Gamboa 2004; Pérez-Sáinz and Mora Salas 2007). The proliferation of studies on poverty has led to the adoption of a series of developmentalist and functionalist approaches, featuring very quantitative techniques (Gallardo and Osorio 1998). These are inadequate for measuring non-economic dimensions; yet, they still prevail, despite efforts towards more openness for qualitative research method-
ologies to improve the understanding of existing social interactions. Hence, many studies are still being reduced to the quantitative and developmental paradigm (Boltvinik 2003).

### 27.2.2 Migration, security and borders

The concept of *security* was also found to be of particular significance in the debate on migration in Central America and the Caribbean, mainly because it is associated both with migration and with a geopolitical approach beyond the migratory issue – a combination that translates into the reinforcement of border control within the study area. It therefore seems appropriate to suggest incorporating this topic in further research as well, with a focus on a critical analysis of *how* and *where* the concept of security is elaborated, as well as on the impacts of security on migrant households’ projects. The rationale for this recommendation is based on the following findings.

Important evidence is being explored by Albrecht Schnabel and his colleagues from the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas, who state that migrants, besides being affected by everlasting residential and labour insecurity, are often perceived as a threat by the inhabitants of recipient territories. In this context, the methodology of multi-stakeholder workshops can help to open up new dimensions of security, giving locals the chance to consider migrants as a solution instead of as a problem (Schnabel et al 2006; Schnabel et al, in preparation).

The role of frontiers with regard to demarcation of national territories, the rise of new forms of social inequality, and the enforcement of mechanisms favouring or hindering people’s access to social and environmental resources became evident in research carried out by NCCR North-South researchers in border areas between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and in border areas of Central America. In this respect, but also in the context of social reproduction strategies, border areas have become scenarios for the redefinition of social practices (Cedano and Dilla 2005; Dilla 2006; Morales-Gamboa and Pérez 2006; Poschet 2006).

It is particularly important to re-examine the link between migration, borders and livelihoods (Thieme 2008), because “the boundaries of social fields do not necessarily overlap with those of nations. National social fields are those that stay within national boundaries, while transnational social fields connect actors, through direct and indirect relations, across borders” (Lev-
itt and Nyberg-Sørensen 2004). In a research project recently initiated by Jorge Angulo (2008), the idea is explored that rural populations in the Mexican and Guatemalan border areas have redeveloped their own social practices and strategies and become a regional society. This has enabled them to overcome distress caused by different natural events as well as the negative effects of economic globalisation – defined as the opening and deregulation of global markets.

A study by Haroldo Dilla (2006) is another important contribution to the debate on migration and borders: it examines urban borderland intermediation in the Dominican Republic. This study provides a significant analysis of the spatial, political and economic features of a border that went through a transition from a closed border (with Haiti) to one with increasing economic exchanges and interdependence between formal and informal economic activities. This opening was driven by market and commercial interests and therefore took place in a fragmented manner.

The research illustrates that in spatial terms the opening of the border between the two nations was accompanied by a profound regional restructuring, with the emergence of ‘transborder corridors’ consisting of urban networks with multiple inequities between subjects. Furthermore, the study describes how – even though the geopolitical borderline retained a major significance – major social and territorial transformations occurred that were governed by progressive formal and informal permeability of the border. This created a multiplicity of boundaries that both separate and unify the populations on the two sides of the border.

In addition to these findings, Lena Poschet (2006) provides significant evidence for how recent economic, political and societal transformation – brought about with the opening of borders between Haiti and the Dominican Republic – shapes the spatial and social development of the borderland towns of Ouanaminthe in Haiti and Dajabón in the Dominican Republic. In particular, the study explores the fact that the transformations resulting from the opening of borders have not helped to diminish existing inequalities between these neighbouring cities, nor have they strengthened social ties, despite existing functional economic interaction.

Consequently, this research illustrates how both towns on the border, Ouanaminthe and Dajabón, have developed particular forms of dependency. Whilst for a considerable number of Haitians it is important to cross over into
the Dominican city in search of better living conditions in terms of income, health care and education, for most of the residents of Dajabón consulted during the research, crossing the Masacre River into Haiti is not essential. The fact that most of these Dominicans have never been to Ouanaminthe must also be emphasised, along with a widespread fear about going there based on the belief that conditions in Ouanaminthe are unsafe and precarious.

Poschet also observed a process of internal segregation marked by internal characteristics of both populations, where functional connections were unavoidably governed by the progressive permeability of the border. Furthermore, the author points out that although bilateral trade represents a key source of revenue for Haiti and the Dominican Republic, findings show that for Haiti, in terms of Haitian migration flows, the Dominican Republic has considerable importance as a destination for the export of labour force. In this regard, Dajabón’s bi-national market constitutes a crucial source of earnings for both border towns. In summary, this study demonstrates that analysis of borderland intermediation is relevant in studying the multifaceted interactions taking place in borderland spaces.

A study by Susana Martínez (2006) focuses specifically on the gender aspects of international migration: the author examined the labour situation of Guatemalan women doing domestic work in Tapachula in the Mexican province of Chiapas. Her current work explores the problems and perceptions of emigrant women from rural areas working in the domestic services sector in the borderland region between Mexico and Guatemala. The study examines the role of international migration from the gender perspective and as part of the livelihood strategies of the households to which the migrant women belong and which they leave behind when they emigrate.

27.2.3 Migration, livelihoods and social networks

The study of livelihoods and migration reveals a series of ruptures in traditional ways of interpreting social reality and social practices. One such rupture involves another view of territorial order, which is referred to at various levels in the transnationalisation of the social life reproduction rationale: society, locality and family. With the increasing openness of national economies and economic interpenetration, social networks have become weighty and extended. Hence, survival strategies and people’s material and symbolic resources have also assumed a transnational linkage, resulting in the establishment of new scenarios of daily life and coexistence, but also of conflict (Morales-Gamboa 2007, 2008).
A second rupture, closely related to the previous, occurs between the *actor* and the *system* as an expression of *desocialisation* (Touraine 1999). The establishment of the well-known *transnational* social field approach is a demonstration of both the duality and the vital ambiguity of such a rupture. This rupture is noted in a social relationship marked by a polar or multi-local reality between the actor’s place of origin and his or her place of residence, through which he or she travels under the effect of an osmotic experience, characterised by multiple or dual belongings (Benhabib 2005; Kaufmann 2008).

Concurrently, this osmotic experience relates to a third rupture, between ‘social reproduction logics’ and ‘regulation mechanisms’. Despite the fact that migration plays a key role in maintaining the economic and socio-political order within a region, it is part of a rupture of the normative order and the established forms of regulation of social life. Migration is also an example of the current limitations in migrant people’s exercise of rights and, therefore, citizenship. Migrants are prone to threats of rejection and control policies, as well as being a focus of xenophobia. In this sense, lack of access to justice, the rupture of social belonging patterns and the absence of political participation place migrant people at risk of losing their citizenship or of living in precarious conditions of citizenship (Morales-Gamboa 2008).

Another issue articulated in the study of migration and social exclusion within the NCCR North-South research programme is the concept of *citizenship*. Being poor and excluded puts migrants in a situation where they are not only not recognised as citizens, but where their human rights are also violated by the criminalisation of immigration. By contrast, a tolerant and inclusive civic culture would be more able to open its doors to new members because it would not doubt its own moral principles and values (Soysal 1994; Bosniak 2006).

27.2.4 Challenges for migration research in the region

Consequently, while a number of statistical, evidence-based research projects in the Central American and Caribbean region exist and suggest a link between the characteristics of migration and poverty, such associations do not turn out to be the most adequate way of explaining the existing connection between migration and livelihoods. It seems more appropriate to explore the issue of the relationship between migration and livelihoods, considering the conditions of social structure and transnational features that generate a variety of forms of inequality and social exclusion.
The concept of a ‘culture of poverty’ seems to have been evoked first by Oscar Lewis (1966), based on the idea that poor families and groups have a fairly simple system of values and that these people remain in poverty because of their adaptation to the burdens of poverty. However, understanding livelihoods from the point of view of social structure instead of the ‘culture of poverty’ concept provides further explanation of the scope of livelihoods in terms of generation of social reproduction strategies as a response to inequality and as a true resource for empowerment of the poor (Pedrazzini 2006).

The migration–livelihoods relationship, as examined in relation to the conditions of social structure, makes it possible to link the study of migration to systems of social differentiation, taking account of gender variables, ethnic characteristics, and the places of origin of migrant people. In this respect, studies of men’s and women’s participation in migration processes and its effects on households and domestic life assume greater significance (Angulo 2008).

Similarly, there are various considerations concerning a possible rationale for redesigning development policies to focus on the relationship between migration and development (Villafuerte Solís 2008). From the perspective of development, migration is considered a livelihood and transnational social practice – a matter that leads to reconfiguration of the nation-state space as an analytical category of social relationships. Therefore, a geo-economic and geopolitical view appears to be appropriate for characterising the phenomena occurring in the Central American and Caribbean region.

Consequently, it is important to re-frame the study of migration from the perspective of livelihoods. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to place this relationship within the framework of the historical specificities in which migration occurs as a product of new reconfigurations of social life reproduction strategies at the transnational level, with the intention of overcoming a strictly utilitarian and functionalist approach.

The following analytical scenarios allow us to embed the questions derived from further conceptualisation:

– The expansion of free trade and the recent signing of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) create new pressures that will have effects on the growth of migration flows into the U.S. labour markets. Despite the fact that these migration flows represent a solution to the crisis,
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at the same time they create new forms of economic and political dependency. The region then falls into a trap where on the one hand it opens up its borders for free trade, generating processes of denationalisation of the economies and the disarticulation of local productive activities and, therefore, causing job losses. On the other hand, it implements border security measures to avoid population exodus to the United States.

– People are confronted with unemployment, abandonment of productive activities, and the risk of falling into extreme poverty, besides facing economic globalisation, trade liberalisation, economic deregulation, and increasingly intense and recurrent natural disasters, arguably due to global climate change. In response, they implement strategies such as international migration as a way to make use of social resources at various levels; they also implement family strategies, thereby boosting social networks and enhancing social capital (Angulo 2008).

– Since the migration process is the focal point of ongoing research, it is necessary to clarify that this issue involves territorial interdependence. Thus it becomes necessary to study households with regard to social environment, i.e. by implementing the notion of ‘social structure’, with the purpose of identifying the ‘social exclusion’ and ‘social integration’ dimensions of the current globalisation process and its effects on social life (Sojo and Pérez 2003). Hence the way to approach the issue could be through ‘family units’, in order to observe their transformation and interaction with social structures.

As a result of these analytical scenarios, the following strategic research focus has been formulated by the NCCR North-South research team in the Caribbean and Central American region for Phase 3 of the NCCR North-South programme: identification and innovative promotion of social practices and mitigation of the effects of global change, through an analysis of livelihoods, strategies for poverty alleviation, and phenomena derived from migration practices.

27.3 Conclusions

Central American and Caribbean societies constitute a heterogeneous and fragmented region characterised by social polarisation and weak governance; where such conditions have stunted economic growth and caused con-
Conflicts, there have been wars – civil wars as in Central America during the 1980s – and continual political instability, as in Haiti. These developments have in turn generated heavy expulsion of populations, whether as refugees or as new international migration flows. This diaspora, far from resolving institutional and structural weaknesses in the countries of origin, has aggravated social inequalities and added new forms of dependency, instability, conflict and insecurity.

Although there is a common perspective suggesting a link between migration and poverty, an attempt to understand the relationship between migration and livelihoods from the standpoint of social structure and living conditions instead of from the perspective of a culture of poverty, allows for a broader explanation of the scope of such relationships in the development of social life reproduction strategies, while envisaging migration as an answer to problems of inequality and as a resource for empowering the poor. By re-framing the study of migration from the perspective of livelihoods, it is both possible and necessary to adopt a historical approach in order to analyse the dynamics of migration as a product of the reconfiguration of social life reproduction strategies at transnational scales, and in order to overcome strictly utilitarian and functionalist visions of migration.

In conclusion, the analytical relationship between migration, livelihoods and social practices allows for new steps to be taken in reflecting on the Central American and Caribbean region. If the results of previous phases of research are to be linked with ongoing research, it will be important to identify new thematic fields and scenarios of analysis related to the key problems in the region, under the theoretical and conceptual lens of the NCCR North-South.
Endnotes

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4 All countries, except for El Salvador, have coasts on the Caribbean Sea.

5 Further elaboration of these ideas can be found in Villafuerte Solís and García Aguilar (2008). On violence and insecurity, see also Pedrazzini (2005).
Silvia Hostettler conducted research on land-use changes, transnational migration and the impact of remittances in western Mexico for her PhD in Phase 1 of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South programme (Hostettler 2007). This research was based on a political ecology approach. The results show that the impact of remittances on land-use changes is variable and depends on the socio-economic, political and environmental context of the community as well as the individual situation of the migrant household.

Further elaboration of these ideas can be found in Levitt and Nyberg-Sørensen 2004.

For a more extended analysis of such topics in the Latin American context we recommend the other articles compiled in Sojo 2003, especially Franco 2003 and Gordon 2003.
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