

The Migration Crisis of Central American Children¹

The news of a growing number of Central American children who have been apprehended at the border, reaching more than 50,000 individuals so far this year, has struck a chord in the US. This situation has resulted in outcries of a humanitarian crisis, so much so that it has renewed the political debate around immigration reform and drawn attention to Central American regional issues such as security and development.

In fact, this crisis may create space for discussion and action around developing a strategy focused on human development, entrepreneurship, and educational reform in Central America. The three central ideas in this debate are forced migration, obsolete economic development throughout the region and the desire to take advantage of the economic opportunities posed by migration. Agricultural exports alone are insufficient for long-term human and economic development of Central Americans, who are themselves the labor force that creates the wealth of their region. If this labor force continues to be informal, poorly educated, without technical knowledge, and underpaid, people will look for other options, such as emigration. Improving personal security and addressing the current political instability will also have important implications with regards to retaining the labor force.

The migration crisis

The immigration of undocumented minors is not a new phenomenon. Since the end of 2000, reports discussed a growing number of children traveling by foot to reunite with their parents in the United States, facing huge risks (the movie *Sin Nombre* illustrated this tragic reality). Despite this, the numbers of people detained this year suggest that this migration has increased dramatically. The table below demonstrates how thousands of children have been apprehended along the US-Mexico border, and of these, more than half have been held in detention centers across the United States. Others have managed to cross the border illegally. In fact, the number of Central American migrants (the majority of those who are crossing the border) has increased significantly since the recession (see second table).

Table 1: Number of detentions of children at the border

Country	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
El Salvador	1,221	1,910	1,394	3,314	5,990	11,436
Guatemala	1,115	1,517	1,565	3,835	8,068	12,670
Honduras	968	1,017	974	2,997	6,747	15,027
Mexico	16,114	13,724	11,768	13,974	17,240	12,146
Total	19,418	18,168	15,701	24,120	38,045	51,279

Source: US Customs and Border Protection²

¹ Manuel Orozco, "La crisis de los menores: una migración forzada," *El Faro*, <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201407/opinion/15627/>

² <http://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-border-unaccompanied-children>

Table 2: Adult Migrants from Central America

Annual immigrant entries to US	2010	2011	2012	2013
Honduras	24,267	27,462	28,306	30,897
Nicaragua	5,828	6,353	6,118	6,566
Guatemala	32,175	34,455	37,287	39,802
El Salvador	23,079	23,796	25,498	26,114

Source: Author's estimations. See "Migration and Development in Central America," 2013.

The causes of the growing number of people who are entering the United States, and in particular of the huge wave of children who are attempting to cross the border, have been the subject of speculation from social organizations, the US Congress, and a wide array of agencies and ministries. They have also prompted a visit to the region by Vice President Joe Biden. For some, this wave is the result of regional social and economic decay, especially in terms of security problems affecting many sectors throughout Central America. For others, this situation is the result of rumors that the Obama Administration has been granting "permisos" to minors that cross the border. Frustration in the absence of immigration reform has also prompted many families to help their children cross the border. This decision does not include those whose children are left with border patrol by coyotes.

One immediate issue that has not been discussed is the decrease in prices that people are paying to have immigrants brought to the United States. The high levels of violence on the migration route reduced the amount of people who were making the journey for a short time; however at the same time the consolidation of control of these routes by organized crime groups created an industry with economies of scale that has reduced prices. A year and a half ago, it cost over US\$5,500 in Honduras or Guatemala to bring someone, and today prices have dropped to US\$3,500, with smugglers even offering "family packages" for US\$7,500. Add to this the deep frustration that many immigrants feel about the failed attempts at immigration reform in the US, and you see a growing desire to bring their children across the border. They do not, however, pay coyotes with the intention that they will leave their children at the border; this is something that the coyotes are doing on their own.

Table 3: Central American Migrants with Children

	Mexico	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua
Children living with me in the US	50.5%	55.1%	18.6%	31.8%	32.1%
Children living in country of origin	19.8%	7.6%	33.0%	34.5%	33.9%
Children living in both countries	5.0%	17.7%	8.2%	13.6%	12.8%
No children	24.8%	19.6%	40.2%	20.0%	21.1%

Source: Orozco with Jewers, 2014.

An obsolete economic development model

While this is a humanitarian crisis that the United States must address, it is also important for Central American governments to engage with migration policy more broadly. In many cases, they are standing around with their arms crossed, not taking this issue seriously. This is not a question of rumors of "permisos," rather one of the legitimacy of the Central American governments. First, it is outrageous

that a region that talks about promoting development and democracy does not recognize that 40 children leave their countries borders *each day*, in addition to the 40 or more adults who leave to enter the United States through Mexico. The programs that currently exist to alert migrants of the dangers inherent in crossing the border are not effective. The only way to ignore a situation of this magnitude is through intentional ignorance.

Second, the current economic growth model is not distributive nor does it generate growth. Half of the national income of the economies of the Central American region depends on exports from maquilas, tourism, and a few agricultural exports. For Honduras and Nicaragua, 10 agricultural products represent 50% of all exports, a situation that creates dependence and vulnerability in the international market. In addition to migration, migrant economic exchanges have generated at least 15% of the national income. If one considers government expenses in the form of income and jobs, the Central American region lives off of public revenue and four sources of external savings!

This growth, which focuses on agriculture, has not contributed to human development. The regional labor force continues to be informal, unskilled, uneducated and underpaid: only 15% of people have a higher education, 20% have some formal training, and over 35% work informally. The quality of this labor force, the most important tool for regional economic development, is not up to a single standard anywhere near the levels that a modern society should enjoy and require. Third, the political climate continues to be unstable. In each country there continues to be an absence of agreement among political elites and between elites and the rest of the population. Add to this the problems caused by insecurity, with homicide levels of 12 to 15 each day in Honduras and Guatemala.

The economic opportunities of migration

Even with the high levels of migration and the high risks that Central Americans face in order to look for better opportunities, governments in the region do very little to increase wealth and create conditions for migration to be an option instead of being, as it is right now, a necessity. The number of people migrating is high, and migrants cannot be blamed for leaving when so few opportunities exist and insecurity is overwhelming. The following table shows the total number of existing migration policies in Central America, which are conservative when compared to the size of the migration problem.

Table 4: Main Policy Areas for Migration & Development in Central America

Country	Areas of Action	Main Policy Initiatives
El Salvador	Prevention	“Concientización sobre los Riesgos de Migrar de Manera Indocumentada;” “Desarrollo Humano y Migraciones;” Programa Apoyo Temporal Al Ingreso (PATI); Migrant Rights’ Trainings for Consulates
	Communication	CONMIGRANTES; Casa El Salvador; Right to Vote Abroad
	Operational Engagement	Salvador Global
	Reinsertion	“Bienvenido a Casa;” Centros de Atención
Honduras	Prevention	“Desarrollo humano juvenil via empleo, para superar los retos de la migración”

Guatemala	Communication	Catracho Seguro; La Semana Binacional de Salud
	Operational Engagement	Honduras Global; Remesas Solidarias y Productivas
	Reinsertion	Centros de Atención; Fondo de Solidaridad
	Prevention	“Política Nacional de Generación de Empleo Seguro, Decente, y de Calidad;” “Programa de Generación de Empleo y Educación Vocacional para Jóvenes de Guatemala”
Guatemala	Communication	CONAMIGUA; Literacy Programs
	Operational Engagement	Remesas Productivas; Encuentro al Migrante (Investment)
	Reinsertion	Guatemala Repatriates; Job Matching; Nuestras Raíces (youth reintegration)

Source: Orozco with Yansura, “Migration and Development in Central America,” 2013.

Governments are “living off” undocumented, insecure, and vulnerable migration. Even worse, no country has serious policies to take advantage of economic activities that are a byproduct of migration. For example, Central Americans send over US\$8 billion in remittances from the US and buy nostalgic products that represent over US\$2 billion in trade. Remittances generate savings for recipient homes of over US\$2 billion, most of them informally. Governments disregard the opportunities these activities represent for development, and the fact that they may create wealth and adequate redistribution for resources.

Table 5: Migrant Economic Activities

Current trend	Central America	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras
Remittances sent from US	\$8,254,551,000	\$3,237,696,000	\$2,373,840,000	\$1,209,600,000
Value of nostalgic trade imports	\$2,475,545,000	\$992,800,000	\$667,250,000	\$382,500,000
Telecommunications (minutes and texts)	\$1,495,155,600	\$448,512,000	\$471,000,000	\$270,000,000
Value of international telecommunications	\$163,744,734	\$53,821,440	\$42,390,000	\$32,400,000
Share of calls outbound to the US from Central America	54%	94%	29%	72%
Tourism: visits by migrants to home country	\$1,164,962,400	\$467,200,000	\$314,000,000	\$180,000,000
Value of transfer of capital (personal investments)	\$658,851,500	\$222,750,000	\$127,000,000	\$43,250,000
Value of philanthropic donations	\$58,248,120	\$23,360,000	\$15,700,000	\$9,000,000
RECIPIENT ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES				
Savings accumulation among recipient households	\$2,096,932,000	\$840,960,000	\$565,200,000	\$324,000,000

Source: Orozco with Yansura, “Migration and Development in Central America,” 2013.

The Strategy

What shall be done under these circumstances? Blaming the US for the absence of immigration reform is not enough. The onus should be put on Central American leadership, authorities and public servants, as well as upon society as a whole. A study by the Central Bank of El Salvador showed that 40% of Salvadorans are willing to emigrate. A 2009 study conducted in Honduras showed that 17% had the intention to migrate and that number has grown by now. Alfred Hirschman's theory is useful here: he states that people's decisions are bounded by three options: exit, voice and loyalty. Central Americans are voting with their feet and each country in the region has to regain or build trust in itself.

In the long term, this calls for a global effort that integrates economic growth with equity, entrepreneurship, education, and policies that leverage remittances for development. It is also time to provide space for fresh ideas and leadership. In addition, it is important to improve the education system, increase the technical knowledge of the local labor force, reduce informality through value chains that integrate workers and small businesses within the business sector, increase access to the financial system, and mobilize credit to increase competitiveness.

In the short term, the migration crisis needs to be addressed for what it is: a phenomenon of forced migration in which the focus needs to be on stemming the flow at the source, which means stopping those who traffic in persons.