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Background Paper

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Development and Migration in Mexico's Rural Communities

by Andrew Wainer and Michele Learner

“It’s just me and my wife here. The kids have left There wasn’t any economy here to satisfy their needs. There wasn’t enough money. [Our sons] work in construction. The women work as maids in houses. We don’t have food enough to sell; there’s not enough productivity.”

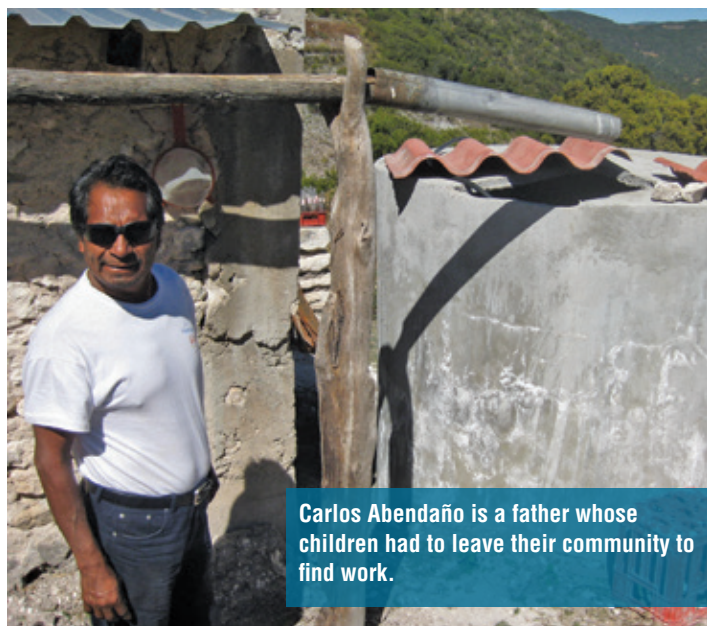
– Carlos Abendaño, 54, Santa Catarina,
Oaxaca, Mexico

Here’s a question conspicuous by its absence from most U.S. discussions of unauthorized or illegal immigration: Why do people risk their lives crossing the Mexican border, take jobs most Americans won’t do, and live away from their families—surrounded by an often unfamiliar language and culture? The answer isn’t complicated: inequality, hunger, and poverty in the communities immigrants leave behind.

Fully 60 percent of unauthorized immigrants in the United States are Mexican. Mexico is a middle-income nation, but hunger and poverty persist because of the country’s high degree of economic inequality. Between one-third and half of all Mexicans are poor and as many as 18 percent live in extreme poverty, meaning they cannot meet their basic food needs.

The problem is most severe in Mexico’s rural areas, where more than half the residents are poor and a quarter are extremely poor. It follows that many Mexicans who leave to find work are likely to come from rural areas. Mexico’s population is mostly urban and just 25 percent of the population is rural, but about 44 percent of migrants to the United States come from the Mexican countryside.

Very little of the U.S. foreign aid given to Mexico goes to poverty-focused development. In 2009, 96 percent of



Carlos Abendaño is a father whose children had to leave their community to find work.

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the approximately \$787 million for Mexico was spent on military and drug enforcement assistance. Yet development projects that focus on reducing poverty and hunger in rural communities can ease the pressures to migrate, whether legally or not.

This vital link has been largely overlooked by people arguing about U.S. immigration policy, but some small programs in Mexico make the connection and focus on rural communities that send the most migrants to the United States (i.e., migrant-sending regions). In this paper, we explore how these initiatives work and consider how development assistance can help revitalize Mexico’s rural areas and reduce migration pressures.

Susan Bird, program officer for the Ford Foundation in Mexico, explains what's at stake: "And so they kind of wait ... for the day they can leave. That's the saddest thing, I think, is the cultural loss. ... You see communities, entire communities made up of children and grandparents, and there's a whole generation that is missing."

Focusing on Agriculture

In the past two years, the United States has led international efforts to re-focus substantial attention and resources on agriculture in developing countries. It's become increasingly obvious that raising agricultural productivity is essential to growing enough food for the world's increasing population—or even to holding the line in the face of global climate change.

Investing in agricultural productivity has proven to be one of the best ways to reduce poverty around the world. Mexico is no exception, either in the decades of neglect of smallholder agriculture or (fortunately) in the potential of the agricultural sector to revitalize rural areas and drive economic growth.

Rural Mexico's current predicament is a result of the cumulative impact of drought, economic crises, competition from subsidized imports, falling commodity prices, and international and national economic policies. Family farms suffered particularly from the loss of rural jobs and a reduced ability to generate income. Of all young adults (ages 15 to 24) in rural Mexico in 1990, almost 25 percent had left by 2000 due to a lack of opportunity in the countryside.

Although the Mexican government has primary responsibility for reducing the country's rural poverty, the United States can provide critical support for programs that help ease migration pressures at their source. Without

support for small and medium farmers' efforts to earn a living, Mexico's rural economy will be increasingly dependent on migration, remittances, and illegal activities such as drug trafficking.

Making the Connections

About 200 miles south of El Paso, TX, the 160 families in the Mexican village of Avila Camacho, in the state of Chihuahua, struggle to maintain both their apple orchards and their population of younger people. The *For a Just Market* project, an initiative of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Vista Hermosa Foundation,¹ supports their efforts.

"...Reducing the long-term pressures to migrate is a fundamental goal of all the work CRS Mexico has engaged in," said Chuck Barrett, economic development consultant to CRS in the country. Programs in migrant-sending regions such as Chihuahua recognize the need to incorporate migration concerns fully into their missions and planning.

"[Immigration is caused by] the devastation in the rural economy in Mexico," Barrett said. To work in [Mexico] without thinking about this link would be turning away from the face of reality."

Barrett wanted to build a relationship between Mexican immigrants working in U.S. apple orchards and small apple farmers like those in Avila Camacho. He found a partner in the Vista Hermosa Foundation, the charitable arm of a business with more than 6,000 acres of apple and cherry orchards in Prescott, WA. The vast majority of the orchard's workers come from Mexico, so the foundation has firsthand knowledge of the poverty that drove many of its employees north to find work.

In 2005, the Vista Hermosa Foundation began supporting several CRS economic development programs in Mexico's apple-growing region. "It was such a natural fit for us as apple farmers to be working with these farmers in Mexico who were living well below the poverty line," said Suzanne Broetje, Vista Hermosa's executive director and a Bread board member. "[They were] caught up in losing their land and migrating north in search of work. That's what we see on this end."

The goal of *For a Just Market* is to increase rural incomes and create jobs by helping small farmers in Chihuahua, Mexico, which is both Mexico's largest apple-producing region and an area drained by migration. In line with World Bank recommendations on agricultural development in middle-income countries, *For a Just Market* works to improve farmers' productivity and ability to

CRS Mexico and Vista Hermosa Foundation representatives provide technical assistance to apple farmers in Chihuahua, Mexico.



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market high-quality products. With improved produce and better knowledge of the market, farmers can increase the income generated by their orchards—giving them a potential alternative to migration.

For decades, with the decline of the Mexican rural sector, small producers have been dependent on middlemen to survive. Because they had little or no financial cushion to enable them to wait until prices were highest to sell, they were forced to sell to intermediaries at whatever price was offered. And because they lacked training in techniques to improve the quality of their apples (and thus raise selling prices), farmers had to rely on sheer volume for their whole income. Both problems prevented farmers from earning more money that they could invest in productive activities on their farms.

A key component of *For a Just Market* is technical assistance to introduce new methods of producing higher-quality apples. An exchange program between apple farmers in Chihuahua and immigrant workers with many years of experience at orchards in Washington state enabled the Mexican farmers to learn strategies proven to improve apple quality, such as tree pruning and trimming, drip-irrigation, tree spacing, and anti-hail netting. “The training totally changed my mentality,” said Chihuahua apple farmer Daniel Delgado.

Drawing on the agricultural expertise of immigrant workers themselves contributed to the program’s success. Even more important was CRS’ choice of a local partner. The Frente Democrático Campesino (FDC or Farmers’ Democratic Front) is an organization of small and medium-sized farmers in the state of Chihuahua. It takes a two-pronged approach to providing its 5,000 member families with economic opportunity: developing strategies to increase incomes and generate employment, and advocating for policy changes that benefit small and medium-sized farmers.

The international funding provided by CRS and Vista Hermosa helped the FDC secure matching funds from the Mexican Ministry of Agriculture for a cold storage facility so that FDC members don’t have to pay others to store their crops. “We now have the ‘hook’ to get the resources we need,” said FDC advisor Jesus Emiliano. “Now that we have some money for the project, we ask [the government], ‘How much are you going to put in?’”

Perhaps the FDC’s most important income-protection initiative is a revolving loan program that allows farmers to borrow to cover their basic expenses for the period between harvesting and selling their crops. Such credit is typically not available to small farmers. Once producers’ apples are sold in November or December—at a price several times higher than during the harvest glut in October—the loans



Representatives from CRS and a Chihuahua apple producer organization discuss the construction of a cold storage unit that will allow the farmers to store their apples until market demand peaks.

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are repaid. “[We] now have the possibility to commercialize [our] products,” FDC’s Pedro Torres said. “[We] don’t have to sell [our] products to the first person who arrives.”

Building on Rural Development Programs

There is anecdotal evidence that *For a Just Market* has created opportunities and increased incomes for some farmers in Chihuahua’s apple-growing region so that migration is not their only choice. The program is also providing options for migrants who return to communities that typically are not prepared to help them get resettled.

While it is a gradual, perhaps even generational, process, the FDC is working with the parents of migrants to help build an incentive for their children to return. “The older ones are trying to reactivate [the farms] so that young people stay and put down roots,” FDC’s Jesus Emiliano said. This approach worked for Daniel Delgado, 53. Two years ago, his 22-year-old son returned to Chihuahua from Phoenix after he lost his job during the U.S. recession. Due partly to the support Delgado received through *For a Just Market*, there’s enough work on his farm to employ his son. “Thank God he is working with me,” Delgado said. “He’s my right-hand man.”

The Chihuahua apple project is small, with about 200 apple-farming families, but the incomes of participating farmers have increased, including 54-year-old FDC member Arturo Caraveo. Caraveo emigrated to the United States in 1991 and worked as a custodian in Los Angeles. Now he works with the FDC’s new apple tree nursery, which is being used to produce more lucrative brands of apples—such as Galas—to seed new orchards. “If you plant new orchards there’s a chance to create something over time, to provide

more income,” Caraveo said. “But it’s going to take [a few] years.”

For a Just Market also helped the Molinar family, whose members are now reunited after being dispersed for 10 years. Isidro Molinar’s three brothers have each returned to Chihuahua from the United States, the latest in the summer of 2010. While they might have just waited out the recession and returned once the U.S. economy recovered, they are instead finding work on the family farm.

When asked if he was concerned that his brothers would re-emigrate to the United States, Molinar said, “They are not even thinking about it now. We are planting some apple trees. We’re not so helpless now.”

Challenges for Efforts to Ease Migration Pressures

The idea that rural development programs can be specifically designed to provide alternatives to migration is a new one. Projects such as those supported by CRS Mexico and Vista Hermosa are pointing the way and beginning to identify the ingredients required for success:

- A long-term outlook. To regenerate small farms and increase incomes, farmers must reinvest their income gains to create stable jobs and livelihoods. Development partners must invest in longer-term projects and plan for how the program can become sustainable.
- Strong local partners. To be effective, local organizations must be democratic, truly grassroots, and independent of political interests that could change their focus.
- Commitment to community change. While technical improvements can create economic opportunities, it takes community transformation to build viable livelihoods for the long term. Technical assistance must be introduced gradually by credible trainers so that new strategies are accepted as an alternative to current practices, which often include encouraging young people to go abroad and send money home.
- More assistance for rural development. In 2009, 96 percent of all U.S. funds for Mexico went to military and drug enforcement assistance. Very little funding goes to job-creation or other programs that could reduce pressures to migrate (just over \$11 million in 2009).
- A complementary focus on “pull factors.” Higher wages in the United States are a powerful reason people are “pulled” to migrate. Foreign assistance for rural development has the potential to improve small

farmers’ incomes and generate employment, but it is only one part of a long-term strategy to construct a more effective immigration system.

Antonio Garcia, 25, combined savings from four months of work in Texas and the assistance of a local farmers cooperative to launch a small business in rural Chihuahua, Mexico.



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The Way Forward

Mexico, especially its rural areas, presents a unique opportunity to carry out U.S. foreign assistance projects that promote development with the aim of reducing pressures on local people to migrate. Since Mexico is the source of 60 percent of all unauthorized immigrants to the United States, the United States should acknowledge the links between poverty, inequality, and migration, and work with migrant-sending areas to address the causes of unauthorized immigration.

Projects that seek to reduce migration pressures deserve increased attention from U.S. policymakers. In regions that send large numbers of migrants, U.S. foreign assistance programs should incorporate migration issues into development projects. Rural development projects in migrant-sending communities can increase their impact through partnerships with small farmer organizations. Strengthening independent small farmer groups creates on-the-ground advocates that influence the national government to support policies and provide public resources to help small producers.

Endnote

¹The Vista Hermosa Foundation supports Bread for the World Institute’s work on immigration, hunger, and poverty.