Exercising the ‘right to stay home’ in Mexico

The globalization of Mexico’s economy, accelerated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), brought with it predictions of rural depopulation, yet Mexico’s rural population continues to increase. This has led Associate Professor Xochitl Bada from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Professor Jonathan Fox from the School of International Service at American University, to explore the cross-border migration patterns from rural Mexico to the US. After analysing census data from 2000 and 2010, they discovered two long-term trends together with a countryside population who exercise their ‘right to stay home’ by refusing to migrate.

While the media have persistently highlighted an upsurge in the number of unauthorised crossings of the southern US border since the pandemic, the arrival of refugees from other countries obscures longer-term trends of migration from Mexico. The globalisation of Mexico’s economy and society, accelerated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), an agreement eliminating most of the trade barriers between the US, Canada, and Mexico, was widely predicted to result in rapid rural depopulation, yet contrary to most expectations, Mexico’s rural population continues to increase.

These conflicting trends have led Dr Xochitl Bada, Associate Professor in Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and Professor Jonathan Fox from the School of International Service at American University, to explore cross-border migration of the rural population from Mexico to the US. Comparing census data from 2000 and 2010, they discover two long-term trends as well as a persistent countryside population who exercise their ‘right to stay home’ and choose not to migrate to the US.

The net migration rate of Mexicans to the US peaked two decades ago. The rural proportion of Mexico’s population remained broadly stable, in spite of the loss of agricultural employment. This research centres on the size and distribution of the rural population in Mexico during the period from 2000 and 2010, since the first unabated decrease in immigration from Mexico to the US took place during this decade. The relationship between migration and development may seem clear-cut, in that continued underdevelopment promotes migration, but the researchers explain how research into migration and rural development ‘have evolved on parallel tracks that rarely intersect’. This multifaceted and nuanced association between migration and development therefore underpins the fundamental empirical question of the study, as the researchers consider the persistent rural population who are exercising their right to not migrate to cities or across national borders.

EMPIRICAL QUESTIONS

First, the researchers apply innovative methodology to analyse census data to identify trends in cross-border migration from these predominantly rural areas, employing the government’s migration intensity index. This index is derived using a government survey sampling 10% of the population on international migration. From the perspective of rurality, ethnicity and migration, this synthesis of 2010 data reveals that most of the indigenous population remains rural. Moreover, almost a quarter of the persistent rural population that had little dependency on migration to the US. In 2010, only a quarter of the rural population lived in municipalities with high migration indices and the number of people living in rural municipalities with high levels of international migration rose by only 4% in the decade running up to 2010.

When the researchers examined these trends in relation to their spatial distribution, of the ten states with the largest rural populations, only Michoacán and Guanajuato depended highly on international migration. Both are situated in the centre of Mexico’s historic sending region.

EXERCISING THE RIGHT TO STAY HOME

Analysing the census data confirmed that after the introduction of NAFTA, most of the residents living in rural areas chose to remain in Mexico rather than risk their lives attempting to cross to the US. By choosing to search for work within Mexico, these communities were exercising their right to stay at home and not migrate during the period from 2000 to 2010. By comparison with previous migration studies that demonstrate how and why rural Mexicans left the countryside for the US, this research indicates that a surprisingly large proportion of Mexican residents choose to stay at home.

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FUTURE TRENDS
The researchers describe how economic dislocations due to the pandemic and the unusually low unemployment levels in the US from 2018 to 2020 have resulted in an increase in cross-border outmigration to the US, but it would be premature to say whether this is a blip in the trend or the beginning of a new pattern of migration, due to a lack of comparable data for 2020.

Data-gathering for the 2020 census was impacted by COVID-19, and the replications for trends in the rural population and migration are yet to be examined. From the long-term standpoint of structural change, there has been a significant deceleration in the reduction of the proportion of the population living in rural areas. Likewise, the decline in the percentage of the economically active population employed in agriculture and the rate of migration from rural Mexico to the US have also slowed. Rural inhabitants continue to exercise their right to stay home even though sustainable rural development has not been at the heart of the Mexican government’s agenda. Governmental social programmes have focused on transfer payments to individuals rather than investing in job creation by social enterprises, suggesting that it is doubtful that social spending will create sustainable rural employment.

Despite the new president’s remarking that ‘migration should be a choice rather than an obligation’, persistent violence has led to ongoing forced displacement from some regions. In addition, the new economic policy emphasizing strict budgetary discipline prioritises industrial mega-projects with a direct effect on many rural inhabitants. The overall agricultural budget has been cut, and it is unclear if investment in family farms has grown. Within national agricultural policy, subsidy programmes favours large growers were cut, which allowed for budget increase for programmes that targeted smallholders.

The researchers sum up that considering the expected radical depopulation post-NAFTA, agricultural employment was indeed hollowed out, but rural and agricultural are no longer synonymous. Even so, millions of Mexican families choose to stay in their rural communities rather than risk dangerous border-crossings or potential alienation and urban insecurity. Professors Bada and Fox conclude that ‘in spite of so many powerful “pull” factors, rural agency appears to have thrown sand in the machinery of structural determination and rural depopulation.’

Behind the Research

Xóchitl Bada

Jonathan Fox

Research Objectives

Xóchitl Bada and Jonathan Fox research population and migration trends in rural Mexico.

Detail

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Xóchitl Bada is an associate professor in Latin American and Latino Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She studies migrant access to labour rights, organising strategies, and transnational advocacy mobilisations. She is co-author of Sealing Migrant Worker Rights: How Advocates Collaborate and Contest State Power, University of California Press. Jonathan Fox is a professor in the School of International Service at American University, where he directs the Accountability Research Center. He studies the relationships between accountability, transparency, and citizen participation.

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References


