



**The rise and fall of the “migrant superhero”  
and the new “deportee trash”:  
Contemporary strain on mobile livelihoods  
in the Central American region**

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DIIS Working Paper 2010:22

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**DIIS WORKING PAPER 2010:22**

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Cover Design: Carsten Schiøler  
Layout: Allan Lind Jørgensen  
Printed in Denmark by Vesterkopi AS

ISBN: 978-87-7605-404-5

Price: DKK 25.00 (VAT included)  
DIIS publications can be downloaded  
free of charge from [www.diis.dk](http://www.diis.dk)

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## **ABSTRACT**

A basic assumption in migration studies is that a search for better livelihood conditions is the main cause for migratory movements. Nevertheless, few studies take in-depth research into specific livelihoods and the contexts in which they unfold as their point of departure. Such an approach would focus on the ways in which making a livelihood links up with larger-scale patterns of population movement, the range and variation in mobility that such movements involve, the social institutions, networks and migration industry actors facilitating and sustaining mobile livelihoods, and the shifting physical/environmental and geopolitical contexts in which migration occurs.

Over the last decade, migrants have become seen as vital agents of development by international financial institutions, various United Nations organizations and home country governments, who in their efforts to “capitalize” on migrants’ remittances have contributed to establishing the image of the migrant super hero, who through hard work in foreign lands contribute to sustain their families, communities and nations. Nevertheless, the recent international financial crisis and raising anti-immigrant sentiments have led to a criminalization of mobile livelihood strategies and subsequent mass deportations of undocumented migrants.

Using Central America and the well-developed local notion of the migrant superhero as point of departure, this working paper asks three critical questions: The first is whether poverty or insecurity best explains contemporary migration flows in the region? The second question takes issue with how remittances play into on the one hand local social security nets, and, on the other hand, increasing national and regional insecurity. The final question concerns the status decline of former migrant heroes who through the act of deportation become “trash” in the public imagery. This question indicates that resource concepts such as availability, access and quality need to take social status into account.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last 10 years international institutions and organizations, such as the World Bank, the regional development banks, the European Union and various United Nations offices have begun to see migration as a remedy to various development problems. In Central America, the example of El Salvador gave rise to the first UNDP Human Development Country Report to apply a human development approach to migration and to seeing El Salvador's highly mobile population as a fundamental development resource (PNUD El Salvador 2005). In the 2009 global Human Development Report entitled "Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development" (UNDP 2009), the migration-development nexus went mainstream. In these and other similar publications the *impact* of international migration on development has revolved around remittances, their growth rate and the scope for making a more effective (productive and poverty reductive) use of these financial flows.<sup>1</sup>

Whether highlighted as the new development mantra (Kapur 2004) or dismissed as a short-lived potential, policy discourses have tended to focus on the *financial* qualities of remittances, often ignoring more complex scholarly insights and migrant perspectives (Levitt and Sørensen 2004) as well as the broader local, regional and global contexts

in which migration is embedded. Migrant contributions to development are increasingly acknowledged – and sometimes even used in political campaigns directed towards maintaining migrants' loyalty towards their homelands – but the assumptions underlying the study of the asymmetrical transfers that accompany migration continue to reflect the interests of the Global North (Glick Schiller and Faist 2009), and ignore the ways in which migration has become embedded in broader development and security discourses.

Using Central America and the well-developed local notion of the migrant *superhero* as point of departure, this working paper asks three critical questions: The first is whether poverty or insecurity best explains contemporary migration flows? The second question takes issue with how remittances play into on the one hand local social security nets, and, on the other hand, increasing national and regional insecurity. The final question concerns the status decline of former migrant heroes who through the act of deportation become "trash" in the public policy imagery. This question indicates that resource concepts such as availability, access and quality need to take social status into account. It also indicates a less clear-cut view on the traditional division in economic and non-economic causes of human mobility, and a need to introduce what we might call the local effects of insecurity. In short, the main argument is that the impact of migrant remittances cannot be calculated without taking cultures of violence, insecurity and deportations and the *securitization* of migration into account.

To contribute possible answers to these questions, I briefly turn to the regional migration history; when discussing current migration trends to that of Guatemala and Honduras; and, when contesting official discourse,

<sup>1</sup> After the outbreak of the international financial crisis, a small part of this debate became concerned with the potential harmful effect of the recession, in particular the link between the high rises in deportations of undocumented migrants, growing unemployment rates among those migrants that manage to stay and a subsequent decline in remittances sent to the countries of origin (Castles 2009). By May 2010, however, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) announced that although 45 percent of the remitters living in the U.S. sent less money home in 2009 compared to the year before, "remittances are likely to stabilize for 2010" (Blossier 2010).

to images of the Latino remittance superhero and a particular Guatemalan deity, Maximón. I derive concepts and theories for my arguments from globalization and transnational theory, in particular from texts attentive to change drivers from above as well as from below (e.g. Guarnizo and Smith 1998). The data presented consist of a mixture of migration and remittance statistics, government positions, and expressions of the migration experience in works of art and in public culture; the method deployed consists of moving back and forth between text and context, and between bare statistics and human consequences.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. A SHORT CONTEXT ON CENTRAL AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION

From being a region of revolutionary upheavals, full-scale civil wars, collapsing regional economies and/or the demise of dictatorial forms of political authority, Central America has over the last 10-15 years experienced a peace and demilitarization process, transitions to democracy, and economic re-stabilization under a new neo-liberal model of free market capitalism. Several structural contradictions in the social order nevertheless remain unresolved, such as extreme inequality and widespread poverty, marginalization of indigenous populations, problems related to corruption and impunity, and the pandemic of organized crime, drug-traffick-

<sup>2</sup> From November 2005 to May 2009 I served as a senior advisor to the Danish Development Cooperation in Central America. During this time I had little time for ethnographic fieldwork in the classic methodological sense. I did have excellent access to government statistics and government officials as well as regional NGOs working with migrant rights. In October 2009 I interviewed officials in Guatemala and Mexico on deportation and outreach policies.

ing and extreme levels of violence in public as well as private spaces (Robinson 2003). In addition, natural disasters stemming from earthquakes, hurricanes, landslides, flooding or draught occasionally – and as an effect of global climate change increasingly – hit the region.<sup>3</sup> Since large percents of crops are grown on hillsides, agricultural yields are extremely dependent on recurrent extreme weather conditions. According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), large areas of Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador have lately been negatively affected.<sup>4</sup>

Poor livelihood situations are closely associated with various forms of insecurity (including food insecurity) in Central America. As appears from the latest Human Development Report (UNDP 2009), Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua have a considerably lower ranking in the Human Development Index than Costa Rica and Panama.<sup>5</sup> Relative-

<sup>3</sup> For Honduras, for example, Hurricane Mitch constituted an unprecedented catastrophe due to the devastation caused, the human and social toll and the losses and damages to its infrastructure and productive system. Nearly one third of the highway network was affected, with the consequent isolation of cities and productive zones; thousands of dwellings were destroyed leaving thousands of families homeless, many of them unemployed and with no source of income; there was likewise a negative impact on future production and exports, economic growth, employment and revenues. According to the National Emergency Cabinet, the hurricane caused the death of 5,657 people (without counting the 8,058 missing), injuring another 12,272 and initially affecting 1.5 million people (of the 6.2 million total population). See [http://www.iadb.org/regions/re2/consultative\\_group/background2.htm](http://www.iadb.org/regions/re2/consultative_group/background2.htm)

<sup>4</sup> See <http://ipsnews.net/print.asp?idnews=51829>

<sup>5</sup> The Human Development Index ranks 182 countries in the world according to the average achievements in three basic dimensions: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living. None of the Central American countries are in the top rank of very high Human development, led by countries such as Norway (rank 1), Canada (rank 5), United States (rank 13), Denmark (rank 16), and Germany (rank 22). Costa Rica and Panama are among the 45 countries considered having a high human development, whereas the other five countries are considered having medium human development. Low human development countries include several African countries and Afghanistan.

ly high life expectancy and alphabetization rates signal better health and educational opportunities than found in countries with low human development. However, and despite economic developments, half or more of the Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran and Belizean populations remain poor. Whether relying on official UNDP statistics or statistics developed by the Central American Human Rights Ombudsman Institutions (which tend to be more attentive to structural

barriers and inequality), the BNPs by capita are modest and the poverty rates are high. So is unemployment (extremely high in Honduras and severely underreported in the rest of the countries), while violence and general insecurity remain high and homicide rates rising to larger numbers than reported during the civil wars, especially in what is generally known as *el triángulo norte* (the northern triangle), consisting of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Table I. Development indicators Central America (most recent figures 2005-2008)

| Human Development                        | Guatemala        | Honduras       | Nicaragua      | El Salvador      | Costa Rica        | Panama           | Belize           |
|--|------------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| <i>HDI rank</i>                          | 122              | 112            | 124            | 106              | 54                | 60               | 93               |
| <i>BNP per capita (USD)</i>              | 4,568<br>(1,724) | 3,430<br>(977) | 3,674<br>(935) | 5,255<br>(2,129) | 10,180<br>(4,505) | 7,605<br>(4,434) | 7,109<br>(4,025) |
| <i>Life expectancy</i>                   | 69.7             | 69.4           | 71.9           | 71.3             | 78.5              | 75.1             | 75.9             |
| <i>Alphabetisation</i>                   | 69.1             | 80.0           | 76.7           | 80.6             | 94.9              | 91.9             | 75.1             |
| <i>% Poor</i>                            | 54<br>(56,9)     | 41<br>(74,4)   | 46<br>(65,5)   | 35<br>(35,1)     | 5<br>(21,2)       | 15<br>-          | 43<br>(44,3)     |
| <i>% Unemployment</i>                    | 3.2              | 27.8           | 5.6            | 6.6              | 5.5               | 7.2              | 9.4              |
| <i>ODA (mio USD)</i>                     | 253.6            | 268.8          | 740.1          | 199.4            | 29.5              | 19.5             | 12.9             |
| <i>per capita</i>                        | 20.1             | 94.5           | 134.9          | 29.0             | 6.8               | 6.0              | 44.2             |
| <i>% BNP 1990</i>                        | 2.6              | 14.7           | 32.6           | 7.2              | 3.1               | 1.9              | 7.3              |
| <i>% BNP 2005</i>                        | 0.8              | 8.2            | 15.1           | 1.2              | 0.1               | 0.1              | 1.2              |
| <i>Homicides per 100,000 inhabitants</i> | 44.24            | 59.60          | 14.38          | 59.91            | 5.60              | -                | -                |

Sources: UNDP 2009; figures in parenthesis CCPDH 2007; homicide rate PNUD Guatemala 2007; unemployment rate downloaded from [www.indexmundi.com](http://www.indexmundi.com).

Poverty and unemployment are conventionally considered the main push factor behind migration, whereas state violence and political persecution are understood as the common driver behind refugee movements. This division is difficult to uphold in Central America where everyday violence has tended to continue unabated in the countries emerging from political conflict and undergoing democratization efforts. At the same time it is a common stereotype that poverty is the primary cause of violence. Evidence provided by local and international human rights observers nevertheless shows that inequality and exclusion, associated with unequal access to economic, political as well as social resources, intersect with poverty to precipitate violence (Federación Luterana Mundial 2009).

Such linkages do not only relate to income disparities but also to exclusionary factors such as unequal access to employment, education, health, and basic physical infrastructure. Unequal access to mobility may be added to the picture, as lack of financial resources or access to transnational social networks may force new migrants into the arms of human smugglers or organized criminal networks operating en route. In addition, the absence or inadequacy of state security protection, policing and juridical systems particularly affect the poor, the marginalized, and as of recently, the deported undocumented migrants.

The export-oriented economies of the region that rely on free trade zone assembly manufacturing, non-traditional agricultural production, and services concentrated in call centres or tourism, have not provided sufficient foreign investments and tax revenues for the large-scale reconstruction efforts needed after the devastating civil wars and natural disasters. At the same time, Official Development Assistance (ODA) has declined considerably, as many international donors

have redirected their attention to Africa. Remittances surpassed US aid to the region between 1978 and 1994. From around 1990, Central American governments have sought to incorporate migration and remittances into their own strategies (Robinson 2003). Given this context, some Central American nation states have embarked on (El Salvador) or are beginning to pursue (Guatemala and Honduras) state-led transnational strategies aimed at forging linkages with their populations abroad (Popkin 2003).

### **3. FROM INTERNAL OR REGIONAL TO TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION**

Migration is by no means a new phenomenon to the region, as seeking employment abroad dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Until the 1970s, however, Central American migrations were generally characterized by internal or regional movements of a transborder, binational and temporal character with the purpose of sustaining local livelihoods. The armed conflicts in El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala nevertheless changed this pattern, first and foremost by causing massive forced displacements during the second half of the 1970s and throughout the 1980s. Most people affected by the civil wars became internally displaced; others found refuge across the border to a neighbouring country, in the United States or in Europe. When peace accords were finally reached, a significant outcome of the peace processes was a massive return of Central American refugees to their countries of origin (Castillo 2003), ending the refugee circle, as conventional theory would have it (Black and Koser 1999). But as in other migratory movements, not everyone returned but either stayed in the country of asylum or moved further on,



hereby paving the way for later migratory movements. The presence of significant groups of Central Americans in countries such as Mexico, the United States, Canada and Spain formed the basis for the formation of community networks and facilitated successive movements and the creation of transnational social spaces (Hagan 1994; Castillo 2003).

Post-conflict migrations are generally seen as distinct from earlier refugee movements and as driven by economic rather than political factors. But while 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: The necessity to migrate in response to a lack of opportunities for personal development, blocked (if not downward) social mobility, the loss of jobs, and the need to find other ways to provide food and other necessities for family members. Other factors such as new waves of everyday violence (including femicide) further add to the picture.

In addition to these local drivers, Central American migration must be understood as part of a global and globalizing phenomenon. On the one hand, recent migrations were produced and favoured by a global context of economic, political, commercial, technological and cultural inter-dependence (Robinson 2003). On the other hand, we need a global approach to be able to account for the multi-dimensional effects of migration in sending as well as receiving societies (García-Falces 2005; Guarnizo 2004). For example, according to the first country-specific Human Development Report that took migration into account (PNUD El Salvador 2005), migration had become the prime form of El Salvador's participation in globalization. This is increas-

ingly also the case for Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Currently, more than 10 percent of the Central American population is involved in international migration. For some countries, as for example El Salvador, it is assumed that up to 40 percent of the population lives abroad (PNUD El Salvador 2005). A lower but considerable percentage of Nicaraguans lives abroad, primarily divided between two major destinations, the United States and Costa Rica. The figures in Table 2 show that Central America is highly affected by migration, but not in a uniform way. The armed conflicts of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua have produced higher migration rates than more stable countries such as Costa Rica and Panama. In addition to the generalized country-specific figures, it is the most conflict-ridden zones within countries that have produced most migrants (Mahler and Ugrina 2006).

In the Guatemalan case it is assumed that some 1,200,000, or approximately 10 percent of the population, live abroad, primarily in the United States (PNUD Guatemala 2005). Of these, 60 percent are believed to be undocumented. Increasing poverty levels among rural families have led to a feminization of migration, with growing numbers of younger women (single mothers and heads of families) moving northward. Other women stay put in Guatemala, where they have become known as *viudas blancas* (white widows) suffering long-distance or in-laws' social control and, occasionally, abandonment. According to the International Organization of Migration, more than three fourths of the Guatemalans in the US are male (71.5 percent male migrants, 28.5 percent female). Around a third of the population receives remittances, 57 percent of them live in rural and indigenous areas (IOM 2005).

Table 2. Migrants per country of origin according to region and country of destination, 2006

| Destination            | Origin             |                     |                      |                    |                    |                    |
|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
|                        | Costa Rica         | El Salvador         | Guatemala            | Honduras           | Nicaragua          | Panama             |
| <i>NORTH AMERICA</i>   | 134,827<br>(73.8%) | 993,608<br>(86.6%)  | 1,108,389<br>(86.0%) | 725,935<br>(81.8%) | 331,465<br>(44.8%) | 150,531<br>(81.4%) |
| Canada                 | 4,296<br>(2.4%)    | 44,744<br>(3.9%)    | 29,971<br>(2.3%)     | 11,151<br>(1.3%)   | 13,360<br>(1.8%)   | 2,555<br>(1.4%)    |
| USA                    | 127,035<br>(69.6%) | 942,842<br>(81.8%)  | 1,028,951<br>(79.9%) | 706,085<br>(79.6%) | 314,643<br>(42.5%) | 146,371<br>(79.2%) |
| Mexico                 | 3,496<br>(1.9%)    | 6,022<br>(0.5%)     | 49,467<br>(3.8%)     | 8,699<br>(1.0%)    | 3,462<br>(0.5%)    | 1,605<br>(0.9%)    |
| <i>CENTRAL AMERICA</i> | 19,866<br>(10.9%)  | 45,091<br>(3.9%)    | 58,044<br>(4.5%)     | 76,646<br>(8.6%)   | 345,920<br>(46.7%) | 11,594<br>(6.3%)   |
| Belize                 | 115<br>(0.1%)      | 6,886<br>(0.6%)     | 30,890<br>(2.4%)     | 12,089<br>(1.4%)   | 390<br>(0.1%)      | 39<br>(0.0%)       |
| Costa Rica             | -                  | 9,926<br>(0.9%)     | 4,196<br>(0.3%)      | 7,179<br>(0.8%)    | 316,658<br>(42.8%) | 10,270<br>(5.6%)   |
| El Salvador            | 1,313<br>(0.7%)    | -                   | 8,849<br>(0.7%)      | 19,648<br>(2.2%)   | 2,784<br>(0.4%)    | 287<br>(0.2%)      |
| Guatemala              | 1,072<br>(0.6%)    | 12,136<br>(1.1%)    | -                    | 11,424<br>(1.3%)   | 6,721<br>(0.9%)    | 169<br>(0.1%)      |
| Honduras               | 1,608<br>(0.9%)    | 11,299<br>(1.0%)    | 10,873<br>(0.8%)     | -                  | 12,851<br>(1.7%)   | 460<br>(0.2%)      |
| Nicaragua              | 8,202<br>(4.5%)    | 2,561<br>(0.2%)     | 1,991<br>(0.2%)      | 24,293<br>(2.7%)   | -                  | 369<br>(0.2%)      |
| Panama                 | 7,556<br>(4.1%)    | 2,283<br>(0.2%)     | 1,245<br>(0.1%)      | 2,013<br>(0.2%)    | 6,786<br>(0.9%)    | -                  |
| <i>OTHER</i>           | 27,896<br>(15.3%)  | 114,185<br>(9.9%)   | 121,900<br>(9.5%)    | 84,872<br>(9.6%)   | 63,223<br>(8.5%)   | 22,775<br>(12.3%)  |
| Spain                  | 2,336<br>(1.3%)    | 18,179<br>(1.6%)    | 17,374<br>(1.3%)     | 11,354<br>(1.3%)   | 4,572<br>(0.6%)    | 2,252<br>(1.2%)    |
| Pakistan               | 2,200<br>(1.2%)    | 13,797<br>(1.2%)    | 15,457<br>(1.2%)     | 10,712<br>(1.2%)   | 8,955<br>(1.2%)    | 2,235<br>(1.2%)    |
| Germany                | 2,482<br>(1.4%)    | 10,417<br>(0.9%)    | 12,591<br>(1.0%)     | 9,097<br>(1.0%)    | 6,797<br>(0.9%)    | 2,144<br>(1.2%)    |
| Kuwait                 | 1,054<br>(0.6%)    | 6,610<br>(0.6%)     | 7,405<br>(0.6%)      | 5,132<br>(0.6%)    | 4,290<br>(0.6%)    | 1,071<br>(0.6%)    |
| Australia              | 493<br>(0.3%)      | 11,044<br>(1.0%)    | 595<br>(0.0%)        | 436<br>(0.0%)      | 981<br>(0.1%)      | 139<br>(0.1%)      |
| Venezuela              | 1,817<br>(1.0%)    | 952<br>(0.1%)       | 872<br>(0.1%)        | 638<br>(0.1%)      | 2,529<br>(0.3%)    | 964<br>(0.5%)      |
| Colombia               | 821<br>(0.4%)      | 228<br>(0.0%)       | 618<br>(0.0%)        | 492<br>(0.1%)      | 478<br>(0.1%)      | 1,836<br>(1.0%)    |
| Other                  | 16,693<br>(9.1%)   | 52,958<br>(4.6%)    | 66,988<br>(5.2%)     | 47,011<br>(5.3%)   | 34,621<br>(4.7%)   | 12,134<br>(6.6%)   |
| <i>TOTAL</i>           | 182,589<br>(100%)  | 1,152,884<br>(100%) | 1,288,333<br>(100%)  | 887,453<br>(100%)  | 740,608<br>(100%)  | 184,900<br>(100%)  |

Source: Orozco, M., 2008. Efectos macroeconómicos de las remesas. Ponencia elaborada para el informe Estado de la Región, San José, Programa Estado de la Nación.

In the Honduran case, it is estimated that more than one million, or approximately 15 percent of the population, lives abroad. The majority have migrated to the United States, while other destinations such as Spain, Mexico and Canada are beginning to attract considerable numbers. The National Forum for Migration in Honduras estimates that less than 30 percent Honduran migrants in the United States have some form of legal status (including 11.5 percent residents and the 11.8 percent currently under Temporal Protection Status) (FONAMIH 2006). The rest carves out a living as undocumented migrants. Currently, some 100,000 Hondurans leave their country every year, of which only 17 percent are expected to make it. The deportation rates are high. The majority of these migrants are in their most productive age (25-34 years old), and generally have low levels of formal education. Nevertheless, an estimated 30 percent of these migrants are believed to be qualified or highly qualified, and the number of women is rising fast. For instance, 51 percent of undocumented Honduran migrants are believed to be middle class women (Zúniga 2009).

#### 4. FROM MIGRANT EXODUS TO REMITTANCE INFLUX

For decades, the literature on Central American migration centred attention on the lack of local development prospects and on how Central Americans, despite their often marginalized situation, found better livelihood opportunities abroad, either in neighbouring countries or up north (Rocha 2008). The transnational turn in migration studies nevertheless led to a greater awareness of the significance of migration for local development, e.g. by the attention given to the formation and sustaining of long-distance social ties,

the development of transnational communities or of transnational social space(s) linking families and communities across national boundaries and enabling the expansion of the space for personal or household livelihood practices to two or more localities (Sørensen and Olwig 2002). Jaqueline Hagan's (1994) and Sarah Mahler's (1995) pioneering studies of respectively the Guatemalan and Salvadoran migrant communities in the United States are representative of this transnational turn and of how transnational social spaces are created from below. Eric Popkin's analysis of Guatemalan and Salvadoran state-led transnationalism aimed at winning the economic and political support of the migrant populations in Los Angeles provides a case of transnationalism from above (Popkin 2003).

Nowadays, scholars are no longer the sole providers of evidence of the transnational projects accompanying Central American migrations. Several Inter-American Development Bank and World Bank reports currently argue that remittances are crucial to the survival of families and communities in many developing countries.<sup>6</sup> Academic studies confirm that remittances may be a powerful resource for development as well as for post-conflict reconstruction (for an overview, see Sørensen et al. 2002). Once mass migration has taken off and migrant communities are established abroad, a flow of transnational economic and informational resources starts *returning* to the home countries, ranging from different types of remittances to hometown associations as agents of development through political lobby activities and collective remittances (Orozco 2000; Goldring 2003). In Central America, the cumulative effects of these dynamics came to the attention of the Salvadoran government in the mid-1990s (see Mahler 2002),

<sup>6</sup> See [www.iadb.com](http://www.iadb.com) and [web.worldbank.org](http://web.worldbank.org)

Table 3. Migration and remittances in Central America

| Country     | Population 2007 | Migrant population 2007 | Remittances 2003 (mio USD) | Remittances 2007 (mio USD) | Remittances per inhabitant | Remittances (% BNP) |
|-------------|-----------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Guatemala   | 13,105,448      | 1,200,000               | 2,200                      | 4,128                      | 315                        | 10                  |
| Honduras    | 7,326,496       | 1,050,000               | 800                        | 2,561                      | 350                        | 15                  |
| El Salvador | 6,756,800       | 820,000-2,680,000       | 1,800                      | 3,695                      | 547                        | 16                  |
| Nicaragua   | 5,570,129       | 1,002,623               | 778                        | 990                        | 178                        | 12                  |
| Costa Rica  | 4,075,261       | -                       | -                          | 560                        | 137                        | 1.7                 |
| Panamá      | 3,191,319       | -                       | -                          | 320                        | 100                        | 1.8                 |

Source: National statistics provided by BID/FOMIN 2007.

and some ten years later to the Guatemalan and Honduran governments, who – at least in discourse – increasingly reorient their activities through their embassies, consulates and missions in order to recapture the loyalty of their national populations abroad and count on remittances for national development.

Official state discourse has over the last 5 years included remittances (their yearly increase and contribution to the national economies) on a par with foreign investment and exports. During 2007, approximately 12,000 million USD were transferred by Central American migrants to their families back home. In absolute amounts, Guatemala received the largest share, followed by Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. In relative terms, El Salvador received the highest amount per capita, followed by Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua,

while remittances have less significance in Costa Rica and Panama.

Taking the example of Guatemala, remittances constitute the second most important source of foreign currency, contributing approximately 12 percent to the GNP. This importance is even higher in neighbouring countries (El Salvador and Honduras), while at par with Nicaragua. Remittances, in other words, constitute a very important part of the national economy in the majority of Central American countries. This far, the evidence seems to indicate that remittances are reducing overall poverty levels, albeit maybe not at a rate compatible to their volume. For example, among the female family members staying put in Guatemala (either because they decided to or because they had no legal or economic means to leave), 67 percent of the remittances received are used for food and

other daily consumption commodities, housing, health and education. Compared to other studies, claiming that the bulk of remittances is used for conspicuous consumption only, Guatemalan women apparently know how to invest the *migra-dollar* to the benefit of the family. Less than half of the total remittances received are spent on daily consumption, while 22.6 percent are invested in property, construction or renovation of housing, machinery, livestock or savings, 15.5 percent in rent, and 13.8 percent in health and education; investments not only contributing to the economic and productive development of the country (e.g. by generating employment in the construction sector), but also to human development (by generating higher levels of education, better health, etcetera) (UN-INSTRAW and OIM 2007). Recent evidence from Honduras suggests that the crisis generated by the coup d'état against the Manuel Zelaya government makes Honduran migrants remit slightly more.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. THE RISE OF THE MIGRANT SUPERHERO

The historical and statistical data presented this far indicate that remittances play an important role at the family, community and national level in Central America. Their continuous flow is vital to secure the balance of payments and to cushion against the adverse effects of economic crisis and a lack of macro-economic policies that can guarantee access to decent livelihood opportunities. One way of securing a continuous remittance flow is to celebrate their providers. I propose, however, that such celebrations at times are subject to strong

contestation, as may be seen from the following incident, which at a first glance seems to be about religion and proper ways of clothing, but turns out to be about migration and proper ways of developing the indigenous highland communities of Guatemala.

Saint Maximón<sup>8</sup> is usually understood as an indigenous (Maya) deity, a saint of multiple and negotiable identities. Local *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) can be found in various places, such as San Juan de la Laguna, Zunil, Santiago de Atitlan and San Andrés Iztapa. Devotees, first and foremost men, attribute him miraculous powers, and make offerings of tobacco, *aguadiente*, money and even food to request protection, good *milpa* harvests, healing of sickness and solution to emotional problems.<sup>9</sup> Received favours are often reciprocated by a commemorative tablet. The thankful inscriptions on these tablets increasingly make reference to migration, e.g. with statements such as “Thanks to brother Simón for getting me to Los Angeles California and all other favours received”. My discovery of such migration-related inscriptions was actually what first made me interested in the cult of Maximón.

Throughout highland Guatemala, the images of Maximón consist of a clay mask attached to a small body made of rags, at times dressed as ladino, at times in *traje indígena*, and at times – as in the deity’s San Andrés Itzapa transfiguration – in military uniform. More

<sup>7</sup> See [www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/economia/2009/09/090902\\_2200\\_remesas\\_honduras\\_mf.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/economia/2009/09/090902_2200_remesas_honduras_mf.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> The name Maximón is by some interpreted as the reincarnation of the Mayan god Mam. With the imposition of Catholicism over other creeds, Mam became San Simón. Depending on village, he may personify San Judas Tadeo, Pedro de Alvarado or Judas Iscariot. For an interesting analysis of the figure of Judas in the Guatemalan town of Sacapulas, see Shoaps 2009.

<sup>9</sup> The favours are obtained through prayers and offerings which are symbolized with different colour candles which represent a wish: red is for love, yellow and white are for protection, green is for prosperity, blue is for good luck, pink is for health, light blue is for money, black is for jealousy and witchcraft, and purple is to eliminate bad thoughts.

often than not, the dressing style is mixed, e.g. embroidered indigenous trousers under a European or military style jacket, straw hat on top, hand-woven indigenous *faja* (belt) around the stomach, and black leather boots. These mixtures of clothing is by Guatemalan cultural analyst Mario Roberto Morales (2008) interpreted as an expression of identity transvestitism: of the conflictive indigenous self perception (as oppressed and seduced by colonization and ladinization), but also of the self perception of the ladino, whose identity constitution is articulated through the painful assimilation of certain indigenous cultural traits. As such, Maximón, in all his variants, expresses the intercultural *mestisaje* of Guatemala as well as its conflictivity, evidenced by an identity neurosis or ambivalence: negation/adoption; shame/pride, etcetera. The ethnic cross-dressing theme introduced by Morales directs our attention to the ambiguities associated with being a superhero. At times power is achieved through dressing up as the enemy. At other times, the superhero may end up being a traitor if stripped of his/her disguise.

In Santiago Atitlan – an indigenous highland locality *globalized* by international migration and tourism – Maximón resides in one of the *cofradía* member's home all through the year. During Holy Week, the image is moved to a little chapel next to the Catholic Church, from where on Easter Saturday it will be moved to the house of a new *cofradía* member. An important part of this yearly ritual includes a change of clothes, usually paid for by the new host. On Holy Thursday 2008, I happened to visit Maximón's chapel at the same time as a group of local Mayan authorities (dressed in the local fashion mix of European style shirts and knitted short trousers with local fauna embroidery). The men were visibly disturbed by the change of clothes

chosen. Last year's felt hat had been replaced by a cowboy-style one. The original black boots had been changed to cowboy boots made of cow skin. The deity's traditional silk scarves had been replaced by flashy Guccis. The discontent among these men was expressed more or less like this: "What happens is that today the young people do not know how to dress Maximón. They come for Easter holiday; they come with their *migra-dollars* and their United States ideas". And this year the migrants had dressed Maximón Tex-Mex style! My co-visitors stated their displeasure by saying that "nowadays the migrants have captured Maximón's image" ... and that "his magic powers may be lost".

This defence of a local cultural/religious practice marks a discursive shift away from syncretism toward a more essentialist approach. *Migra-dollars* are welcomed if they – like much of the international development aid reaching this region – are invested in the maintenance of indigenous Maya culture and in the strengthening of local traditional power structures. The development model expressed by the elders is one of continuity, of rebuilding structures lost to civil war and poverty, and of maintaining a gender and generational hierarchy, including proper clothing. That young men involved in international migration have the economic means to maintain tradition by paying for Maximón's new clothes simultaneously entails their potential power to resist the ways of the Mayan elders, democratize the access to religious deities and other providers of miracles. At the present transnational era of Guatemalan life, it may be necessary to trace such discursive moments and cultural clashes, to show how the repositioning of development is performatively staged and comprised in narratives that at first glance have nothing to do with development.



Another way of approaching the issue of remittances' contribution to development by attention to "cross-dressing" can be found in the exhibition *La verdadera historia de los superhéroes* (The True Superhero Story). The project is based on an idea linking Latin American migration to the United States and consists of photographs picturing real migrant workers in their daily chores. The images picture them disguised as superheroes that work long hours in order for their families to have better lives at home. A window cleaner, disguised as Spiderman, climbs a building; a pizza delivery man, dressed as Superman, rides a bike. Each photo is accompanied by a text making reference to remittances: Alvaro Cruz works as a cook and runs with the New York *Compadres* (Godfathers) team; he sends USD 300 each month. Noe Reyes works as a fast-food delivery person in Brooklyn, he sends USD 500. Bernabé Méndez works as a window cleaner in the New York skyscrapers; he sends USD 500 per month. Adalberto Lara is a construction worker in New York; he sends USD 300 each week.<sup>10</sup>

While the artist's idea probably has been to create a humorous anti-thesis to current US anti-migrant politics and to the worldwide hostility to migrants *from below*, the image of the migrant as Superhero simultaneously catches the discourse *from above* of several Central American governments. This is the image of the absent citizen who, through remittances, contributes to the daily survival of family members and to local development. *He* does so through a moral obligation to provide for his family, thereby maintaining his role as father and husband in

absentia and restoring his public honor *vis-à-vis* his local community and the state. To be a migrant superhero is in other words strongly connected to a masculine universe.

The feminization of migration is nevertheless altering this picture, as women no longer only migrate to reunite with their spouses, but increasingly in order to provide for their children and other family members. Minerva Valencia, another image from the True Superhero exhibition, works as a nanny in New York, and sends USD 400 every week. Despite the fact that she, like her male colleagues in the superhero business, is imbued with super powers, her cat-woman character and latex outfit is ambiguous. Though modern feminist interpretations may attribute her activities and costumed identity as a response to a history of abuse, a survivor with nine lives, as an adversary of Batman, the other side of Catwoman is a whip-carrying burglar with a taste for high-stake thefts. An anti-heroine rather than a contributor to development, a woman out of her domestic place, a woman taking care of other women's children, leaving her own behind. Such cultural images spill into both popular and official images of the migrant superhero in form of a masculine character whose legitimacy stems from being a provider and a feminine one being associated with family breakdown and the destruction of the domestic order (see Sørensen 2006; Sørensen and Guarnizo 2007).

## 6. FROM MIGRANT HERO TO DEPORTEE TRASH

Central America is currently experiencing one of the region's most intense moments in its migration history; from being a region of emigration, transit and destination to being a recipient of high numbers of deported

<sup>10</sup> The photos by artist Dulce Pinzón search for inspiration in nostalgia, in identity questioning and in political and cultural frustrations; and they portrait multidimensional scenes of the migrant experience. Most of her work uses Mexicans living in the United States as the main character, but easily apply to any other migrant of any nationality. The pictures were downloaded from [www.dulcepinzon.com/es\\_projects\\_superhero.htm](http://www.dulcepinzon.com/es_projects_superhero.htm) (16.12.09).

Table 4. US deportations of migrants by Latin American country and year

|                 | 2003           | 2004           | 2005           | 2006           | 2007           | 2008   |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------|
| Caribbean       | 7,637          | 8,544          | 8,067          | 6,515          | 6,763          |        |
| Central America | 23,144         | 27,686         | 40,773         | 62,298         | 70,060         |        |
| North America   | 156,814        | 177,401        | 170,629        | 188,151        | 210,259        |        |
| South America   | 9,990          | 13,618         | 14,535         | 12,103         | 11,988         |        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>    | <b>211,098</b> | <b>240,665</b> | <b>246,431</b> | <b>280,974</b> | <b>319,382</b> |        |
| Costa Rica      | 514            | 599            | 676            | 795            | 655            |        |
| Cuba            | 76             | 465            | 730            | 124            | 76             |        |
| Dominican Rep.  | 3,472          | 3,760          | 4,210          | 3,107          | 2,990          |        |
| El Salvador     | 5,561          | 7,269          | 8,305          | 11,050         | 20,045         |        |
| Guatemala       | 7,726          | 9,729          | 14,522         | 20,527         | 25,898         | 28,051 |
| Honduras        | 8,182          | 8,752          | 15,572         | 27,060         | 29,737         | 30,017 |
| Mexico          | 155,812        | 175,865        | 169,031        | 186,726        | 208,996        |        |
| Nicaragua       | 820            | 947            | 1,292          | 2,446          | 2,307          |        |

Source: 2003-07 Orozco 2008; 2008 Guatemalan and Honduran Immigration Authorities.

nationals. After September 11, 2001, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was absorbed into the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), under the umbrella of the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), with the purpose of more aggressively targeting illegal immigrants within the United States. It was not until 2008, however, that the ICE began raiding border towns and job sites further north in an attempt to track down illegal workers. One such raid occurred in Postville Iowa in May 2008, where some 390 Central Americans (of whom 290 were Guatemalans) were captured with excess force, imprisoned during months and later deported. Several of the apprehended migrants had stayed in the

United States for up to 20 years (Camayd-Freixas 2009).

The total number of deportations reported by the DHS increased dramatically in 2008, during which year more than 154,000 Central Americans and Mexicans were deported. In the Honduran case, up to 75 percent of all migrants crossing the border were deported from Mexico, around 1 percent stayed on in Guatemala or Mexico, leaving the prospects of a successful journey at less than 25 percent. The high number of deportations leaves us with the impression that Honduran migration is repetitive and that the cost of undocumented migration must be multiplied by the number of attempts necessary to make it to the final



destination. It also indicates that the forms of organization of Honduran migration to a large extent rely on networks of professional traffickers or human smugglers and not so much on transnational family or community networks and other more protective mechanisms. Migratory routes controlled by criminal networks imply higher levels of danger and exploitation. The high number of detained, injured, amputated<sup>11</sup> or dead migrants is together with the growing traffic in human beings among other detectable, negative impacts of this reality. A lack of adequate public policies is further adding to this rather grim picture.

In the Guatemalan case, some 7,000 migrants were deported from the United States in 2004, rising four times to around 28,000 in 2008. According to the Human Mobility Pastoral of the Guatemalan Episcopal Conference (personal communication, March 2009), an average of 6.5 flights a week carrying deportees arrived at the Aurore International Airport and the Guatemalan Air Force Base in the latter half of 2008. The Guatemalan Foreign Ministry reported the reception of around 500 deportees a week throughout 2009, to whom a medical check, one free phone call and transportation to the Central Bus Terminal are the only public services the state has managed to offer this far (personal communication October 2009). Local officials say that 10 years ago roughly half of the deported migrants came home with criminal records. As appears from Table 4, the number of felons has decreased considerably, as ordinary migrants become apprehended at home or in their jobs in factories and farms.

<sup>11</sup> Amputation of arms and legs may happen to Central American undocumented migrants if they fall off, or are pushed off, the fast-running freight trains connecting southern Mexico to the northern border.

Central American deportees have generally opted to try to return to the United States as soon as possible upon deportation. Jobs are scarce and salaries low on the Central American job market. Apart from that, many have left spouses, children and even businesses behind in the United States. But the stakes have become high. If caught, a deported illegal migrant risks a felony conviction and up to 20 years in prison.

From a social remittance perspective (Levitt and Sørensen 2004) deportees, like returnees, potentially bring back intangible valuables, such as a North American education and job skills, cosmopolitanism and English language skills. However, as they come directly from jail, most deportees travel light, with no suitcases, shoes loose without shoelaces and pants without belts. They enter their countries of origin in clothes quite distinct from the superhero disguises referred to earlier, a dress code commonly associated with the deportation of street gang members, the so-called *maras* or *pandilleros*. Apart from being traumatized by the deportation experience, these forced return migrants face prejudice and discrimination by being associated with transnational criminal networks in the public imaginary. From being a migrant superhero, provider of family and community development, imbued with the authority and prestige that comes with living in prosperous foreign lands (Sørensen and Stepputat 2001), and as such approached in official government discourse directed at the migrant population *abroad*, they become *deportee trash* over night. Domesticated or failed migrants, like the rest of the poor and marginalized local population, only get state attention in populist – not public – policies; the fortunate ones receive food or smaller cash gifts from the government in times of elections.

## 7. THE COST OF BEING A SUPERHERO IN TIMES OF INSECURITY AND ECONOMIC RECESSION

So what about the successful migrants, those who manage to stay abroad or those who chose to return and as such to end the migration circle? Which geographies of power (Pessar and Mahler 2003) – local as well as global – are crucial for our understanding of the potentials and limitations in the migration-development nexus? Stricter border enforcements, violence and insecurity seem crucial additional elements for any analysis in search of the developmental impact of migration. As discourses on violence and insecurity habitually are linked to migration, the silences of these matters in remittance debates become conspicuous.

*El Triángulo Norte* currently experiences violence levels considerably higher than that of Colombia, the only Latin American country still suffering from armed conflict. At city level, the Guatemalan capital has homicide rates well above other violent cities (108 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 30.6 in Bogotá). A comparison at department level shows that the Guatemalan department has higher homicide levels (77.3) than the San Salvador department (68.7) in El Salvador and the San Pedro Sula department (61.5) in Honduras (for country-specific homicide rates, see Table 1). In all countries the femicide rates are high and rising. Other forms of violence, such as threats, extortions, abductions and armed robberies, are also rising. Evidence suggests that corrupt police forces and former elite soldiers who lost their jobs during the peace processes are involved in the illegal drug trade, as violent aggressors towards youth and minorities on the margins, and as participants in the prolif-

eration of social cleansing and mob lynching (PNUD Guatemala 2007). When households connected to transnational migrant resources become visibly better off, they become victims of robbery and extortions. The same criminal networks increasingly control the undocumented migrant routes, and abductions on the Guatemala-Mexico and Mexico-US borders have become common. The victims are held in capture for two to three weeks, women are often raped, and the captured migrants are only released if their family members pay the ransom.

Criminal networks have entered the migration industry, and as border crossing becomes more difficult with enhanced border controls, the cost of undocumented migration increases correspondingly. These costs are *not* deducted from the official remittance statistics registered by national banks and reported by the Inter-American Development Bank or the World Bank. How much money do Central American individuals and families invest in failed migration attempts? What is the real cost of having to travel two, three, four or even ten times with coyotes and other clandestine services to get to the North? How much money is used for paying ransoms? And how much money is sent from Guatemala, Honduras and other Central American countries to support family members who have not been able to find a job in the United States, who have been laid off, who have been injured or sick during months of their undocumented stay? Few people probably know. But if the superheroes remit 500 USD a month or 6,000 USD a year, and the cost of undocumented travelling has risen from around 3,000 to 10-15,000 USD, it seems that the remittance balance must be somewhat negative during the first two-three years of migration.

Another missing calculation in the debate on the development impact of remittances is

the cost of failed returns due to a lack of security in countries such as Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. From 2006 onwards, it has become commonplace to encounter returned migrant families, who after having invested during several years in a house with a small store on the side, have had to leave everything behind, to flee to protect themselves from murder threats when they no longer were able to pay the rising extortion fees. Migrant housing, even if not of the *show-off* quality often referred to in studies of conspicuous consumption, attract the attention of gangs and criminal networks. After filing reports with local authorities to no effect, and unable to pay ever-rising security taxes, return migrants are increasingly forced to re-migrate. The product of a long working life outside the country of origin is lost overnight. In addition, Guatemalan newspapers have lately reported several cases of illicit appropriation of property certificates for houses and land plots belonging to migrants living abroad. These and other criminal acts directed towards Central American migrants have not been given priority in local law enforcement politics. The migrant investments lost are not deducted from the remittance statistics.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The transnational turn in migration studies has provided important tools and concepts for enlarging our understanding of lives lived in different places, dreams and aspirations connecting people across state boundaries, and for freeing conceptual tools from methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Transnational migration studies have moreover opened our eyes to the huge efforts that migrants and their families

invest in development in areas often abandoned by state policies. At the same time, transnational migration studies have tended to focus on the social ties and networks that link migrants and refugees to the communities or nation states of their birth. While continuous back-and-forth movements are not necessarily what connects migrants to local development processes, forced deportations and the criminalization of undocumented migration present transnational theorizing with a huge challenge. What happens, for example, to growing numbers of people – large proportions of the youth – who grow up having their minds and mental geographies set on elsewhere while they at the same time find themselves unable to move towards their aspirations?

It seems beyond discussion that remittances contribute to poverty alleviation and development in Central America. Such cash flows now reach marginalized areas with high food insecurity and contribute to restore the means of survival for poor families. The flows will probably not fall drastically in the near future, as some economists predict. However, as the costs of maintaining transnational lives and local investments are not deducted in official statistics, it is possible that their real value is overstated.

Financial volumes aside, it may be of more crucial importance to study the socio-cultural qualities connected to financial remittances. Migrant remittances have traditionally enabled migrants to challenge local power hierarchies and hereby alter their social status. The sudden fall from migrant hero to deportee trash severely affects migrants' ability to draw on bi- and transnational repertoires and may alter their position in local development processes. Such changes need to be studied closely, as do diverging preferences for particular development projects. Migrants and

locals may not share the same visions. Several definitions of what development is or should be are competing, a diverse set of actors disagree on the purpose, the direction, and the end product of development.

Personal and societal insecurity paired with poor livelihood prospects have mobilized millions of Central Americans. The securitization of migration (Lavenex and Kunz 2008) – as evident from stricter border controls and aggressive deportation rallies – makes migration a risky affair. Instead of providing security, the securitization of migration has paved the way for criminal networks' entry into the migration industry (as service providers to migrants en route) and has heightened the risk of exploitation and of violations of basic human and migrant rights (Isotalo 2009).

Finally it is worth highlighting that return and repatriation – be they a personal choice or an effect of deportation – are rarely a sustainable development practice. Particularly not when the countries of origin maintain high levels of structural inequality and insecurity. The examples of deportation and extortion of returned migrants remind us that a successful return is only possible when basic security is guaranteed. The prospects of this happening in the near future are poor.

The cultural images of superheroes, local saints and deportee trash may seem too post-modern for policy makers looking for operational recommendations. However, as such images are extremely powerful at the local and everyday level of migrant-sending societies, paying attention to them is crucial for the planning and execution of integrated migration-development policies. The rising levels of deportation of Central American migrants highlight the dual problem of poor development policies in the South and inadequate migration policies in the North. To effectively tackle the problem requires bi-national

efforts that combine domestic development plans and adequate security measures with migration reforms and changes in deportation policies. When policies are drawn up by privileging migration-security over migration-development concerns, we may miss out on the fact that the North's obsession with security is leading to insecurity for the world's migrants.

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