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Building Civil Society Among Indigenous Migrants

By Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado

The past and future of the Mexican nation can be seen in the waves of the tens of thousands of indigenous people who each year set out on their voyages to the north, as well as the many others who have already settled in countless communities within the United States. To understand indigenous Mexican migrants in the United States today requires a binational lens, taking into account basic changes in the way Mexico is increasingly recognized as a nation of migrants, a society whose fate is intimately linked with the economy and culture of the United States. But the specific indigenous migrant experience also requires recognizing that Mexico is a multiethnic society where basic questions of indigenous rights have made it onto the national agenda but remain fundamentally unresolved.

Mexico's national indigenous population is the largest in the hemisphere, with approximately one-quarter of the Indians in the Americas as a whole. At least one-tenth of the Mexican population is of indigenous origin, according to the government's relatively strict criterion of indigenous language use (though the most recent national census allows for ethnic self-identification for the first time). Despite five centuries of pressure to assimilate, at least one in ten Mexicans reported that they speak an indigenous language in their household.

The future projected by Mexico's dominant economic model has little place for indigenous peoples other than joining the urban and agro-export workforce. Because the majority of Mexico's indigenous population depends on agriculture, their livelihood prospects are highly sensitive to governmental policies toward that sector.

Two decades ago, the government abandoned its previously on-again/off-again commitment to make family farming economically viable. Since the 1980s, peasant agriculture became a target of welfare policy rather than production support, a shift that weakened the economic base of indigenous communities. According to the Mexican government, poverty worsened in 30% of the predominantly indigenous municipalities between 1990 and 2002. The long-term crisis of the peasant economy has been exacerbated in recent years by the persistent collapse of the international price of coffee—the principal cash crop for many of Mexico's indigenous farmers.

Since implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the government's rural development strategy has been based on the assumption that a large proportion of the rural poor would move either to the cities or to the United States. Mexico City's urban Indian population is officially estimated at half a million in the Federal District and one million in the greater metropolitan area.

Both in the United States and in Mexico, indigenous migrants find themselves excluded—economically, socially, and politically—both as migrants and as indigenous people. They work in ethnically segmented labor markets that relegate them to the bottom rungs. In the social sphere, in addition to the well-known set of obstacles that confront cross-border migrants, especially those without documentation, they also face entrenched racist attitudes and discrimination from other Mexicans as well as from the dominant society in the United States.

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ship rights in either country. On the one hand, the U.S. government resists proposals to regularize the status of millions of workers. On the other hand, the Mexican government has yet to comply either with the 1996 constitutional reform that recognized migrants' right to vote or with the 1996 San Andrés

Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture that promised a modest form of indigenous autonomy. In the dominant national political culture, both indigenous peoples and migrants

have long been seen, especially by Mexico City political elites, as less than full citizens—a powerful historical inheritance that only began to change substantially within Mexico by the mid-1990s.

Changing Patterns of Migration

Historically, most Mexican migrants came primarily from rural communities in the central-western part of the country. Over the past two decades, however, the Mexican migrant population has diversified dramatically, both socially and geographically. Their regions of origin now include a more diverse range of states as well as large cities. For example, the Los Angeles area now has federations of hometown associations from at least thirteen different Mexican states, and eleven statewide federations are active in Chicago. Regions of migrant settlement in the United States are becoming similarly diverse—researchers recently found license plates from thirty-seven different U.S. states just along the main road of San Juan Mixtepec, Oaxaca.

As the economic and social dynamics that encourage migration spread more deeply throughout

the Mexican countryside, Mayans from Yucatán and Chiapas now leave to work in California and Texas, Hñahñus and Nahuas from central Mexico are coming to the Midwest and Texas, and Mixtecs from Puebla are settling in the New York area, followed more recently by Hñahñus from neighboring Veracruz. Mixtecs and Nahuas are also coming to the United States from the state of Guerrero.

The Mexican migrant population is also becoming increasingly multiethnic. Some Mexican indigenous peoples such as the P'urépechas of Michoacán and Oaxaca's Mixtecs and Zapotecs have many decades of experience with migration to the United States, dating back to the Bracero Program (1942–1964). Historically, however, most indigenous migrants went to large cities or agribusiness jobs within Mexico and until the 1980s their share of the overall cross-border migrant population was relatively low. More recently, the indigenous proportion of the Mexican migrant population has grown significantly, most notably in both urban and rural California and increasingly in Texas, Florida, New York, and Oregon.

Whereas in the past most indigenous migration to the United States was temporary, today the increased risk and cost of crossing the border without documents has led more of these immigrants to settle in the United States long term. This is possible in part because their networks have matured over the past two decades, particularly in the case of Oaxacan migrants. Before the bracero program, out-migration from the area began in the 1930s, with major destinations being Oaxaca City, the sugarcane fields of Veracruz, and the outskirts of Mexico City. Later labor contractors supplying agribusinesses in the northwestern state of Sinaloa began recruiting, especially in the Mixtec region. These south-to-north



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flows later extended to the Valley of San Quintín in northern Baja California. By the early 1980s, indigenous migrants reached further north, to California, Oregon, and Washington.

Early transnational migrants were able to regularize their status and settle in the United States following the 1986 immigration policy reform (the Immigration Reform and Control Act, or IRCA). In California, Oaxacans have long-established communities in the San Joaquin Valley, the Los Angeles metropolitan area, and northern San Diego County.

Within a relatively short time, these indigenous migrants went from invisibility to outsiders to attracting media attention and becoming a subject of both academic research and progressive activism.

The southern Mexican state of Oaxaca provides an excellent case study of indigenous migration. The 80s saw the extensive incorporation of Zapotecs in urban services and Mixtecs in farm labor—often in the most difficult and lowest-paid jobs. The IRCA reforms permitted millions of earlier migrants to regularize their status, allowing them to move up in the labor force, leaving open bottom rungs in the social ladder for newer indigenous migrants.

U.S. employers of low-wage workers have continued their long tradition of encouraging ethnic seg-

mentation in labor markets. As a conservative scholar and farmer summed up the employers' view, "they will tell you, 'don't bring anybody onto the cement crew who

speaks English' because the second generation will not work like the people from Oaxaca." Indigenous workers also sometimes use ethnic difference to fortify their position in the labor market. As one informant reported to researcher Marta Guidi: "Of course we speak Mixtec! [in the United States]. Sometimes we speak to each other in *dialecto* in front of the [Chicano] contractor so that we can come to an agreement about our wages. And they get mad because they don't understand us."

By the early 1990s, an estimated 45,000 to 55,000 Mixtecs worked in agriculture in California's Central Valley, and 50,000 to 60,000 Zapotecs had settled in Los Angeles, mainly in the central neighborhoods of Koreatown, Pico-Union, and South-Central. The proportion of predominantly indigenous migrants from southern Mexico in California farm labor almost doubled during the 1990s, from 6.1% (1993–1996) to 10.9% (1997–2000), spurring researcher Edward Kissam to project that indigenous migrants will represent more than 20% of California's farm workers by 2010.

The parallel process of long-term settlement and geographic concentration has led to the creation of a "critical mass" of indigenous Oaxacans, especially in California. This has permitted the emergence of distinctive forms of social organization and cultural expression, especially among Mixtecs and Zapotecs.

Their collective initiatives draw on ancestral cultural legacies to build new branches of their home communities. Their public expressions range from building civic political organizations to the public celebration of religious holidays, basketball tournaments involving dozens of teams, the regular mass celebration of traditional Oaxacan music and dance festivals such as the Guelaguetza, and the formation of village-based bands, some of which return to play in their hometown fiestas, as in the case of the Zapotec community of Zoogocho. Their cultural and political projects also include the revival of traditional weaving workshops, the publication of bilingual newspapers, indigenous- and Spanish-language radio programs, and efforts to provide translation services and preserve indigenous languages, as well as the emergence of writers and visual artists with cross-border sensibilities.

New Organizations in a New Land

Indigenous migrants in the United States have developed two main kinds of civil society organizations over the years. The first are "hometown associations," known in Spanish as "*organizaciones de pueblo*," "*clubes de oriundos*," or "*clubes sociales comunitarios*." They are composed of migrants from specific communities who come together mainly to support their community of origin, often by raising funds for local public works such as road or bridge building, water systems, electrification, or public spaces—town squares, sports fields, schools, churches, or community halls.

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The second kind of indigenous migrant associations includes coalition-building projects that draw on hometown, “translocal” ties but bring people together from a broader, regional ethnogeographic sphere. Among Oaxacan migrants, the most consolidated coalitions include the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB), the Oaxacan Regional Organization (ORO), the Union of Highland Communities of Oaxaca (UCSO), the Coalition of Indigenous Communities of Oaxaca (COCIO), the International Indigenous Network of Oaxaca (RIIO), and the recently formed Oaxacan Federation of Indigenous Communities and Organizations in California (FOCOICA).

Changing settlement patterns have also affected organization. Not all migrants have formed satellite communities in the United States, which is a key precondition for organizing along hometown lines, and

even fewer have formed ethnic, regional, or pan-ethnic organizations. Some indigenous Mexican migrants organize as members of ethnically mixed groups, whether along religious lines, as in the case of New York’s Asociación Tepeyac, or along class lines, as in the case of Oregon’s Treeplanters and Farmworkers of the

Northwest (PCUN) or Florida’s Coalition of Immokolee Workers (CIW).

Indigenous migrant organizations also vary in terms of their degree of interest in collaboration with other organizations of migrants or U.S.-focused civic and social organizations. In L.A., for example, the Oaxacan organizations work closely both with other Mexican organizations and with trade unions and civil rights organizations on issues such as access to drivers’ licenses for undocumented workers.

Whatever the type, indigenous migrant organizations open up spaces to create and re-create social identities. In the case of Oaxacans in California, they have done this by institutionalizing collective practices in which they are recognized as Oaxacans and as indigenous people. Academics have termed the real and imagined space in which they develop these

practices “Oaxacalifornia,” a transnationalized space that brings together their lives in California with their communities of origin more than 2,500 miles away.

Ethnic Identity and Collective Action

How does sustained migration and the emergence of organizations of indigenous migrants influence social and community identity, both in the United States and in Mexico?

Like other migrants, indigenous Mexicans bring with them a wide range of experiences with collective action for community development, social justice, and political democratization, and these repertoires influence their decisions about who to work with and how to build their own organizations in the United States.

Racist discrimination and exclusion, both in northern Mexico and in the United States—though not completely new for Oaxacan indigenous people—was sharpened in the agricultural fields of Sinaloa, Baja California, and California’s San Joaquin Valley. Vividly represented by the widespread use of derogatory terms such as “*oaxaquitas*” (little Oaxacans) and “*indios sucios*” (dirty Indians), the racism they encountered intensified their sense of ethnic difference and generated a new, broader ethnic identity that brings together migrants from communities that would not necessarily have shared identities back in Oaxaca. “This experience of discrimination outside of Oaxaca was a major stimulus for indigenous migrants to appropriate the labels—*Mixtec*, *Zapotec*, and *indígena*—that formerly had only been used by linguists, anthropologists, and government officials, and to put them to work in organizing along ethnic lines,” states researcher Michael Kearney.

The newly appropriated ethnic identities that emerged in the process of migration created new opportunities for collective action that were expressed in a diverse array of civic and political organizations in the United States and northern Mexico. These organizations differed from those in the communities of origin, where cross-community solidarity was often blocked by persistent legacies of intervillage conflict. Kearney argues that workers from communities that might have been rivals in Oaxaca came to develop a sense of solidarity through their shared experiences of class and racial oppression as migrants.

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The resulting pan-Mixtec, pan-Zapotec, and later, panindigenous Oaxacan identities made possible broader pan-ethnic organizing among migrants for the first time. This interpretation has been confirmed by recent developments within the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front (FIOB). In early 2005, in response to the increased ethnic diversity among its membership, the FIOB changed its name to the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations. The FIOB's newly-elected binational leadership council includes speakers of five different Mexican languages (Mixtec, Zapotec, Mixe, P'urépecha, and Spanish).

Due to the cultural, political, and language differences between groups of Mexicans, efforts to communicate or build coalitions among these groups

must take these differences into account. Advocacy efforts by U.S. groups on behalf of indigenous migrants face major challenges in terms of building trust and cross-cultural communication. Various incipient cross-sectoral coalition-

building efforts have not coalesced, leading to some skepticism as well as suggesting the need for greater mutual understanding to facilitate the process of finding the common ground needed to sustain balanced multicultural coalitions.

These insights about how migration and racism influence collective identities provide an important context for understanding the transnational migrant experience. Migrants are framed here as social actors rather than passive victims or faceless flows of amorphous masses. In contrast to idealized views of migrants, whether as "heroes" or "*pochos*," what's needed is a focus on their efforts to create new lives, to build their own organizations, and above all to represent themselves in building an indigenous migrant civil society that can help them face the challenges of the future.

Reaffirming Identities

Despite the variety of political backgrounds, the different organizations all emphasize public activities and mobilizations that reaffirm their collective identities as indigenous peoples. Cultural events nourish the multicultural experience of its citizens. The

Guelaguetza festivals of music and dance are among the most important Oaxacan cultural events, and there are now five annual Guelaguetzas in California, beginning in Los Angeles in 1987. The Guelaguetza festivals were first celebrated by the Oaxacan Regional Organization (ORO). Since 2002 FOCOICA has celebrated a Guelaguetza in the Los Angeles Sports Arena, cosponsored by the Oaxaca state government, local trade unions, and the Spanish-language media that draws between six and ten thousand people. The event also promotes Oaxacan imports.

Sports competitions also serve to unify the migrant community of Oaxacans in California. One of the most important basketball tournaments is the Los Angeles "Juárez Cup," organized by the Union of Highland Communities of Oaxaca each March for the past six years. Some sixty-five teams participate, representing more than forty Oaxacan communities.

Some Mixtecs and Zapotecs in California also play a pre-Columbian ball game, "Mixtec ball." The resurgence of this game among immigrants is culturally important because the number of players of the game has decreased in Oaxaca as appropriate open spaces have disappeared. As many as twelve different teams meet in an annual statewide tournament in Los Angeles. As in the case of many other Oaxacan migrant cultural activities—dances, music, food—Mixtec ball has generated a demand for traditional equipment, creating jobs for the artisans back home who make the gloves and balls.

More recently, public religious celebrations have begun to play an important role among indigenous migrants in California. Events organized lately include a dance held to raise money for major repairs to the community's church in Yalalag, a drive to get two local "martyrs" declared "saints," and fiestas to honor local virgins and patron saints.

Through social, civic, cultural, and religious events migrant organizations serve to construct multiple identities. First, they reinforce collective practices that affirm broader ethnic identities emerging from the migrant experience. Second, these organizations—above all, the hometown associations—encourage community building, cultural exchange, and the flow of information. Both processes are crucial for sustaining the links that connect communities of origin with their satellite communities spread beyond their traditional homeland.

Communicating Transnationally

The use of alternative media plays a central role in building migrant civil society. Notably, the biweekly newspaper *El Oaxaqueño*, “the voice of Oaxacans in the United States,” is one of the few professional Mexican newspapers with a binational circulation.

The paper was launched by Fernando López Mateos, a successful Zapotec migrant entrepreneur in 1999. Its content is developed binationally; graphic design work is done in Oaxaca and

then the job is sent to Los Angeles for printing. The paper’s coverage includes civic, political, social, sports, and cultural issues that affect Oaxacan communities in both Mexico and the United States. Reports range from local village conflicts and the campaign to block construction of a McDonald’s on the main square in Oaxaca City, to the binational activities of hometown associations and California-focused coalition building for immigrants’ right to obtain drivers’ licenses and against cutbacks in health services. The press run of 35,000 copies is distributed free of charge throughout California and in other migrant communities in the United States, as well as in Oaxaca. In addition, a second Oaxacan migrant newspaper recently joined the California media scene, *Impulso de Oaxaca*.

Oaxaca’s indigenous migrants are also using radio and electronic media in the United States. Filemón López, a native of the Mixtec community of San Juan Mixtepec, has for the past six years anchored *La Hora Mixteca*, a bilingual (Mixtec-Spanish) weekly program broadcast on the Radio Bilingüe network, founded by Hugo Morales, another Oaxacan migrant from the Mixteca.

Radio Bilingüe recently obtained a Rockefeller Foundation grant for a satellite link that will enable it to transmit its programming to listeners in Oaxaca and Baja California. In 2001 the FIOB and New California Media jointly produced a one-hour news show, *Nuestro Foro*, on local community radio in Fresno (KFCF-88.1 FM). In addition, FIOB has published a monthly newsletter, *El Tequio*, since 1991 and introduced an online version two years ago, allowing its binational membership to share news on local activities and maintain a sense of unity across the U.S.-Mexico border.

A critical part of strengthening communication has been the effort to encourage the use of indigenous languages, both as part of the political struggle for rights and as an endeavor in cultural survival. Indigenous migrants who do not speak Spanish well experience intense language discrimination at the workplace and in their interactions with legal, educational, and health institutions. In at least two well-known cases in the 1980s, indigenous-language speakers were incarcerated in Oregon, unable to offer any defense because they did not speak either Spanish or English. Long-standing Mexican prejudices are widespread in immigrant communities in the United States.

This situation began to change when California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), in a precedent-setting move, hired the first Mixtec-speaking outreach worker in 1993. Migrant organizations have also responded to the need by creating their own translation services in Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui to help people responding to criminal charges or trying to access health care and other public services. Interpreters for the Binational Center for Indigenous Oaxacan Development (CBDIO) work throughout California as well in other states. The Madera School District has hired a Mixtec community outreach worker to communicate with the hundreds of Mixtec parents who send their children to the public schools of this farming community in the heart of California’s Central Valley. The Oaxaca-based Mixtec Language Academy recently began conducting workshops in the Central Valley to teach the writing of the Mixtec language. At the same time, the Mexican government’s Adult Education Agency, active in eighteen U.S. states, recently launched an outreach project specifically for indigenous migrants. These initiatives have been reinforced by the use of CD-ROM teaching materials in English and Spanish that provide accessible introductions to many dimensions of Mixtec history and culture, from analysis of little-known codices to contemporary issues of land and identity (www.mesolore.com).

Indigenous immigrant organizations face a huge challenge with the coming of age of the second generation. As thousands of indigenous immigrant families settle for the long term, the rising number of their children born and raised in the United States poses the risk of losing the indigenous languages. In some cases, migrant youth become trilingual, and hence are

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a crucial resource for the migrant community. For example, FIOB has employed several trilingual organizers in strategic positions, encouraging leadership development. Nevertheless, these cases are the exception. More often, second-generation indigenous youths—like other migrant groups—often show low levels of retention of fluency in their parents' first language.

Women's Changing Gender Roles

Gender roles are also changing the terms of community membership. Some migrant women experience

shifts in the division of labor when they begin to earn wages. In the less-isolated new areas of settlement, indigenous women are exposed to different customs and institutions, and they

sometimes enter into contact with U.S.-based social actors promoting gender equality. *Líderes Campesinas*, a California-based women's membership organization, is making domestic violence a public issue for the first time in many small towns of rural California by challenging the widely held

view that such violence is strictly a private matter. Women are also taking on public leadership roles in mixed-gender migrant organizations in the United States.

At the same time, migration from many indigenous communities remains primarily male, affecting the women who remain in at least two ways: their workload is increased, but they sometimes gain greater access to the local public sphere. In some communities of origin, women are participating more in assemblies, creating their own organizations, and fulfilling their husbands' community obligations. Women often take on an increased public role in the name of their absent spouse, making this a form of "indirect citizenship."

Defining Transnational Communities

This nascent process in which migrants are creating their own public spaces and membership organiza-

tions is built on the foundation of what are increasingly referred to as "transnational communities," a concept that refers to groups of migrants whose daily lives, work, and social relationships extend across national borders. The existence of transnational communities is a precondition for, but is not the same as, an emerging migrant civil society, which also must involve the construction of public spaces and representative social and civic organizations.

There is another way of conceptualizing migrants as social actors, which is the process of constructing a *de facto* form of "*translocal community citizenship*." This happens when indigenous migrants become active members of both their communities of settlement and their communities of origin. Like the idea of transnational community, translocal community citizenship refers to the cross-border extension of the boundaries of an existing social sphere, but the term "citizenship" involves much more precise criteria for determining membership rights and obligations and refers explicitly to membership in a public sphere.

This socially constructed sense of membership is often built through collective action. The idea of translocal community citizenship specifies the public space within which membership is exercised, and focuses on the challenge of sustaining binational membership in a cross-border community.

Nonetheless, the concept of translocal community citizenship has limits as well. It does not capture the broader, rights-based perspective that transcends membership in specific territorially based (or deterritorialized) communities, such as the migrant movement for Mexican voting rights abroad, or the FIOB's emphasis on pan-ethnic collective identities and indigenous and human rights. These collective identities are shared beyond specific communities. The idea of translocal also fails to capture the frequently *multilevel* process of engagement between migrant membership organizations and the Mexican state at national, state, and local levels.

The broader idea of "*migrant civil society*" provides an umbrella concept for describing diverse patterns of collective action. The collective and individual practices that are beginning to constitute a specifically indigenous migrant civil society show us a positive side of what would otherwise be an unrelentingly devastating process for Mexico's indigenous communities—their abrupt insertion into

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globalized capitalism through international migration in search of wage labor.

In spite of their dispersion throughout different points along the migrant path, at least some indigenous communities manage to sustain the social and cultural networks that give them cohesion and continuity. In some cases, the migratory experience has both broadened and transformed collective ethnic identities.

This open-ended process serves as a reference point for rethinking what it means to be indigenous in the twenty-first century. Notably, “long-distance membership” in home communities, and the construction of new kinds of organizations not based on ties to the land, are contemporary phenomena that raise some questions about the classic close association between land, territory, and indigenous identity. Within Mexico, the national debate over how institutions and social actors could

or should build indigenous autonomy has yet to fully grapple with this dilemma.

Recent studies and migrant organizing force us to rethink Mexican migration in terms of the widening diversity of ethnic, gender, and regional experiences. This recognition has practical implications. First, it can help to inform potential strategies through which indigenous migrants can bolster their own capacity for self-representation. Second, the recognition of diversity is crucial for broadening and deepening coalitions with other social actors, both in the United States and in Mexico.

Indigenous Mexican migrants’ organizational initiatives and rich collective cultural practices open a window on their efforts to build new lives in the United States, while remaining who they are and remembering where they come from. This is the challenge they face.

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