

NOTES FOR DISCUSSION
International Dialogue on Migration
Geneva, July 12th- 13th, 2006

THEME OF CONGRESS: MIGRATION AND THE HOST SOCIETY:
PARTNERSHIP FOR SUCCESS:

INDIGENOUS MIGRATION IN LATIN AMERICA: A MAYA
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

With the globalization of the world's economy, now there is no community, even the smallest one that is not being affected by this process of appropriation and exploitation of natural resources by transnational corporations such as mining, oil drilling, lumbering, hydro-electrics, cattle ranches, etc. Besides these major developmental problems, there is drug trafficking and smuggling, and other forms of invasion of the communities land and resources by organized crime. In Guatemala, even the most isolated communities are being dragged into the conflicts by drug traffickers who open up landing strips in the forest and force people to cooperate in this illegal action. To avoid the danger, and complicity the people abandon their places, thus becoming another for of repression against peasants and indigenous people. But we all know that the major factors for displacement in Latin American now are political and ethnic conflicts that leads to war and violence

In the case of Guatemala, we can make a clear differentiation between forced migration and voluntary migration. The so-called forced migrants, are seen in the host country as refugees and receive more support by church organizations than those voluntary migrants. This process was common during the armed conflict in Guatemala (1980s). After the signing off the Peace Accords in 1996 to end the more than 36-years of armed conflict, the number of voluntary migrants has increased and the place of destination is the United States and Mexico. Even if these individuals migrate because of their poverty and the lack of opportunities in their homelands, they are not classified as

refugees but as economic migrants, although they used the networks used by refugees, such church organizations and the sanctuary movement that have some legal offices to help refugees. Their major concern is not a fear of deportation, since there is no persecution after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, but the economic migrants are afraid of deportation because they will not be able to pay the money that they borrowed to pay a “coyote” or the person who helped them to pass across borders.

Integration into the host community: A personal perspective

Integration into the host community is hard and difficult at the beginning. The language barrier is the major obstacle for the migrant, and then, the issue of fear of the unknown which is translated into acts of discrimination by some members of the host community. In countries such as Guatemala where there is poverty and lack of economic opportunities for the majority of the indigenous population, migration has become one of the avenues for getting out of their poverty and achieving better opportunities for their families.

The first process through which a migrant passes is that of adaptation and accommodation. The rhythm of life changes and the migrant lives in a limbo or in a liminal world in which he is not from here or from there. Until the migrant accommodates himself or herself within the receiving community, usually a community of early migrants, then he feels certain safety for his life and freedom to move. But, there must be some opportunities, and it is up to the migrant to decide how to confront the problems with the skills that he has. In other words, he has to decide what to do with his labor force in terms of work and employment. Most migrants from Guatemala are unskilled peasants who take whatever manual job they can find, and it takes a long time for them to make money, pay their debt and start their own business. The connections (families, children benefactors in their home country) are the reasons why they continue to work hard, maintaining a strong connection with their home countries.

Adapting into multicultural societies.

How can a migrant integrate in today`s mobile world? First of all, not all the migrants belong to the same ethnic or layer of society. Some are well prepared and know and plan their journey to a foreign country in search of opportunities, and usually they have a network already established. For the rural and peasant migrants, their possibilities are minimal and they venture without plans or without knowing what they ultimately will do. In other words, those who have education or any training have the skill to engage in any kind of job and constantly improve their lives or incomes, while the less fortunate migrant peasant is condemned to sell his labor force in the fields or in hard manual labor. So, for the educated one it is easier to adapt and accommodate into the host community and be successful, while for the unskilled peasant it life become more difficult and sometimes the migrant fell into desperation, drinking and finally, deportation.

For indigenous people as migrants, integration into the host community is difficult. This is the case of the indigenous people of Latin America migrating to the United States. The first obstacle is that the majority migrate illegally and they can be easily identified because of the color of their skin, they don`t speak the language of the host country, and because of their cultural beliefs and practices they violate some social norms (cultivate corns, other greens around the house where they rent).

Most scholars and experts on migration argue that it is urgent a plural dialogue where the migrants and the inhabitants of the host community should identify what are human characteristics that unite them, and not to focus on the differences that separates them. I argue that these are only ideas that are discussed at academic presentations and not in the field where migrants have to confront a series of difficulties for survival. In the world of the migrant worker, there is competition, not only between the migrants themselves, but with other members of the host community who feel threatened.

But, what kind of integration are we taking about? When the migrants are from the same sending country which gave origin to the new hosting country such as the U.S., integration was easy. Most European migrant to the U.S. could integrate themselves easily because they were white and share similar cultural traditions. This is the famous **melting pot** process in the U.S. where people could easily be adapted into the new forming society. Today, the melting pot is not possible not even for the white, and there is more persecution and stereotyping of the people of color as terrorists since the terrorist attack on the U.S. 9-11. Similarly, the anti-migration law that are being passed places illegal migrants into the U.S- as criminals.

In this condition, integration is not possible, not even coexistence, To coexist is not the same as to live as a free person with your rights respected. And migrants too have responsibilities and must honor the dignity of the nation where they arrive.

Despite the control on migration in the United States, the Hispanic population has grown and the white society is no longer a dominant culture.

INTEGRATION

How are the migrants seen by the host country? In the U.S. the indigenous and peasant migrants because of their skin-color they are easily identified and persecuted.

---They are seen as a danger or threat to the inhabitants of the receiving country.

---Threat to national security

---As a burden to local inhabitants. They used the facilities without paying taxes and services.

On a more positive side, they are seen as:

---as a cheap workforce for manual tasks

---as hard workers and not lazy individuals (Guatemalans)

---or as human beings with many things to offer to the host country.

How to take advantage of this positive assessment of migrants?
 ---It is necessary to recognize the human rights and labor rights of the migrants.
 ---To recognize the valuable contribution of the migrants to their home countries.

HOW TO AVOID ABUSES AGAINST MIGRANT WORKERS?

In the case of Guatemalans, migration has become a way of life. To avoid abuses means proposing policies that must change the structure of the Guatemalan society, giving opportunities to the marginalized and dispossessed to close the abyss of economic disparity existing in the nation.

To propose a rural development program in the regions of origin of the migrants, so that they can find employment or they have the means to produce and contribute to the development of their communities. Example, the Choctaw of Mississippi. The chief managed to stop the migration of young people to the cities, a threat that could affect the very existence of their Indian Nation, by training young managers and bringing Corporations and infrastructure to their lands the Choctaw have succeed. The cheap labor was already available in the reservation just as a any Third World country.

Guatemala must create an office (Secretariat for the Migrant) in order to attend the multiple problems and needs of the migrants who have been contributing to the national economy wit their remittances.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A REFUGEE AND MIGRANT (Attached to the land). Always waiting to go back home, as refugee.

The liminal period (I entered into Dallas visa but I was searched.

- Language barrier
- Culture shock
- What could I offer beside the manual work? My identity, culture, and tradition. My knowledge of Maya culture and literature.
- Process of adaptation and accommodation.

3) Why did you decided to return to Guatemala? The same attachment to the land, the placenta buried at home.

1. Now, with more knowledge, more power than When I left. The power of the return (boomerang)
2. The possibility to offer my own experience and knowledge for the betterment of the indigenous people.
- 3 Very few Mayas educated and it was important to lead and be a role model to be followed.

- 4) Politics? Another area of experiences. Difficult, powerful people in the positions of power do not want to abandon these privileges.

- 5) See my book **Maya Intellectual Renaissance.**

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