The Role of Local Organization in Migration, Remittances and Community Development in the Sierra Juarez of Oaxaca, Mexico

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INTRODUCTION

Migration from the state of Oaxaca, Mexico to the United States, has been recognized as an important characteristic of many Oaxacan communities (Massey 1987; Kearney 1972; Cohen 1999; Cohen, et al. n.d.). Major theories of migration focus on individual decision-making and actions for interpreting causal factors. Little attention is given to community level institutions and arrangements that may bear upon migration decisions and processes. Yet migration carries important implications for communities. Migration may represent a source of income for communities, if remittances can be captured, but it also represents a drain on a community’s human resources and labor pool. Many indigenous communities in Oaxaca make demands on residents for community service, contributions of labor and obligatory fees (cooperación). In this situation, community level arrangements and expectations have a strong potential to influence migration processes.

This study represents a preliminary effort to assess whether community organization -- especially demands for labor, service and financial contributions -- influences migration processes and remittances. We are curious as to whether a community’s ability to manage human and financial resources for group activities translates into a capacity to capture remittances for community activities and projects. Ultimately, but beyond the scope of this study, we aim to explore whether effective community organization translates into improved development indicators.

SITE SELECTION AND DESCRIPTION:

The study encompassed eight Zapotec communities, representing five municipios, located in the Sierra Juarez and the Central Valleys of Oaxaca. These contiguous areas are among the most densely populated areas of Oaxaca; they have been experiencing migration
to the USA at least since the initiation of the Bracero Program in the 1930s. The communities are relatively close to Oaxaca City, ranging from 15 minutes to 120 minutes travel time by bus. Each of the communities are organized based upon “usos y costumbres.”

Table 1: Study Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Municipio</th>
<th>Region</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capulalpam</td>
<td>Capulalpam de Mendez)</td>
<td>Sierra Juarez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Agustín Etla</td>
<td>San Agustín Etla</td>
<td>Central Valley</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Andrés Huayápam</td>
<td>San Andrés Huayápam</td>
<td>Central Valley</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Miguel del Valle</td>
<td>Villa Diaz Ordaz</td>
<td>Central Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Catarina Ixtepeji</td>
<td>Santa Catarina Ixtepeji</td>
<td>Sierra Juarez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El Punto</td>
<td>Santa Catarina Ixtepeji</td>
<td>Sierra Juarez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tierra Colorada</td>
<td>Santa Catarina Ixtepeji</td>
<td>Sierra Juarez</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yuvila</td>
<td>Santa Catarina Ixtepeji</td>
<td>Sierra Juarez</td>
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DATA COLLECTION

The research team collected data in the summer of 2002. The team conducted interviews with community authorities, group leaders, elders, returned migrants and household heads (female and male) in each of the communities. These semi-structured interviews addressed the migration history of the communities, community governance and organizations, the relationship of the community with migrants, remittance patterns, community development, and expectations of members’ (whether resident or migrant members) contributions (communal labor, financial contributions, and service to the community).

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

We draw on two different lines of research for this work. First, we draw on the theoretical and empirical literature addressing the causes of remittances from international migrants and their effects on the economic development of origin communities. Second, we
draw on the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to community institutions, particularly the theories of collective action and common property. These strands of research have rarely been integrated.

The general literature on remittances and community development provides the first point of reference for our research. The remittance behavior of migrants, particularly international migrants, is of increasing importance. For example, remittances sent to Mexico from the United States and elsewhere are estimated to have been approximately $9.3 billion in 2001, or 1.7% of Mexico’s GDP (Orozco 2002). Over the last decade, research on the effects of remittances on community economic development has gone from generally pessimistic to cautiously optimistic (Papademetriou & Martin 1991, Taylor 1999, Taylor et al. 1996a, b). The optimism has resulted from three developments in research on migration, remittances and development. First, researchers have focused on the multiplier effects of remittances. Recent research shows that even when migrant sending households spend all remittances on consumption, they purchase goods that are often produced locally or at least within the sending country. These purchases thus provide employment and/or income to individuals who never migrated (Adelman & Taylor 1990, Durand et al. 1996, Taylor et al. 1996a). Second, researchers have noted the effects of remittances on entire household spending rather than only on the spending of the remittances themselves. Consistent with the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) theoretical perspective (Rozelle et al. 1999, Stark 1991, Stark & Bloom 1985, Taylor 1999), research finds that households use migration to overcome local constraints, particularly the lack of available credit and the risk associated with local production. Remittances allow households to purchase land, houses, and other items that they would not otherwise be able to purchase because of the inaccessibility of credit, regardless of whether the remittances themselves are spent on these items. Third, new theory has identified the circumstances under which migrant remittances will be most
productively invested. Studies point out that remittances can only have a positive effect on development where conditions are already favorable for development (Taylor 1999). Specifically, the more investment opportunities there are, the more incentive there is to remit and to invest or spend remittances in the home community (e.g. Lindstrom 1996).

Taylor (1999) describes these conditions encouraging remittance and investment as linkages to markets (to encourage the production of goods for these markets), functioning credit markets to complement the remittances, and the absence of technological or policy constraints on agricultural production. Specifically, the conditions include electrification, communications, education, and transportation technology, as well as pro-investment economic policy. These conditions are themselves part of the process of economic development. Thus, remittances can only be encouraged and used to bring about economic development when economic development is already underway. In this treatment, communities are seen as passive actors who cannot change their infrastructure and linkages to markets to position themselves to benefit from remittances. In contrast, we argue that the origin community can manage migration and access remittances to bring about development, which will then encourage further remittances. Evidence from studies of migration in communities in Mexico (as well as elsewhere) points out that communities are substantially more organized than typically portrayed. Studies in Mexico show that remittances from migrants are used to finance electrification, road building, restoration and construction of public buildings and other community projects (Durand & Massey 1992, Goldring 1990, Massey et al. 1987, Mines & Massey 1985, Reichert 1981).

Research that does accord an active role to community groups rather than individuals and families focuses on the role of Mexican Home Town Associations (HTAs) in the United States in financing projects in Mexican communities (Alarcon 2002). Past research shows that participation in a HTA is a prevalent way by which migrants remain connected with their
communities of origin in Mexico (Orozco 2002). Mexican HTAs often begin for primarily social reasons (e.g., soccer, celebrations of hometown patron saints) and eventually become more formalized with the nomination of a leadership committee (Zabin & Escala Rabadan 1998), and potentially with the establishment of a federation of HTAs from the same state in Mexico that work with the Mexican Consulate and/or government (Zabin & Escala Rabadan 1998). Research finds that while HTAs send back collective remittances to help contribute to the infrastructure of the home community, HTAs rarely invest productively in the community due to: “lack of financial resources, lack of technical assistance, and the lack of information and guidance, particularly from the state government” (Lopez et al. 2001 p. 35). Other research suggests that even when HTAs organize to complete projects in the home community, the projects are inappropriate due to a lack of participation of home community members in the planning of projects. We argue that communities themselves can overcome these limitations and encourage appropriate development without being dominated by migrants or state government.

To make this argument, we integrate insights from the theories of collective action and common property. Collective action theory addresses human ability (or inability) to overcome social dilemmas. Collective action as used here does not refer primarily to social movements (although this is one expression of collective action), but rather to the formation and activities of self-organized groups who design rules to address recognized needs and meet goals (group emergence may be entirely autonomous, or initially encouraged through external impetus) (Kurien 1995). Humans consistently face challenges to meet subsistence needs and live cooperatively with their neighbors. In the absence of collective action and the associated development of shared institutions to govern behavior, people are likely to choose short-term maximization strategies in which finite goods are exploited as rapidly as possible (Ostrom 1998). The stakes can be high in circumstances related to the utilization of natural resources,
such as forests, fisheries and watersheds, because short-term maximization strategies often result in their destruction ("tragedies of the commons"). Common property institutions, which manage resources through joint ownership, are a form of collective action that can facilitate cooperation and mitigate against tragedies of the commons (Bromley 1992, McCay & Acheson 1987, McKean 1992, Netting 1976).

Human labor represents another resource that can be managed as a form of common property, particularly for groups in which cooperative activities are integral for survival, sociocultural reproduction and managing critical natural and human resources (Netting 1993). Group labor provides a means by which communities can supervise and maintain shared natural resources, such as forests, pastures and water distribution systems. Migration represents a challenge to communities that depend upon residents’ service and labor, but it also offers the opportunity to obtain new sources of income to benefit community members, support sustainable natural resource management, and meet collective interests.

Mutersbaugh (2002) notes that the need for communal labor and service constitutes a motivation for communities to develop rules governing the rights and responsibilities of migrants, and sanctions for those who do not comply. The existence of community-level common property institutions in indigenous communities in Oaxaca appears to be associated with group labor and obligatory duties that motivate communities to directly (and indirectly) influence migration decisions, and capture compensation in remittances or owed labor for those who depart temporarily. Adger et al. (2002) explore how migration may reduce pressures on natural resources, and in conjunction with remittances, contribute to social resilience of the sending community. Our preliminary data indicate that community institutions, which are forms of collective action, may intentionally seek to influence migration and remittance patterns, and directly or indirectly foster development.
Common property institutions, committees, cooperatives, local government bodies, and HTAs represent particularly pertinent forms of collective action for this study. Each of these types of organization may develop institutions (“rules in use”) that may directly or indirectly shape migrants’ decisions and remittances. HTAs represent an important influence, but a focus on HTAs captures but one dimension of the ties between migrants and home communities. Research has recognized that HTAs can assist origin communities during emergencies (Zabin & Escala Rabadan 1998) and contribute to infrastructure such as roads and health clinics (Alarcon 2002), but the work to date often seems to imply that origin communities are passive recipients. Our evidence suggests that some communities are more resourceful in accessing migrants’ resources and maintaining connections than this interpretation suggests. Indeed, migrants’ experience with collective action through traditional self-government may contribute to the formation of effective HTAs (Rivera Salgado 1999).

RESULTS

We found substantial variation in migration patterns. This occurred in numerous ways. For example, communities seem to vary dramatically in the level of out-migration irrespective of the destination. Some communities, such as Yuvila in Santa Catarina Ixtepeji, had very little outmigration, which other communities such as San Agustín Etla have far more migration. Moreover, the destinations of emigrants also varies for communities with outmigration. For instance, Huayápam’s migrants tend to go to many regions of Mexico, while in other communities (Capulalpam) domestic migrants go to Oaxaca or Mexico City. In still other communities, migration is primarily to the United States (e.g., San Miguel del Valle) or to Oaxaca City (e.g., Santa Caterina Ixtepeji). In the two communities closest to Oaxaca City (Huayapam and San Agustín Etla), outmigration posed less of a challenge to the
community than immigration of outsiders, which represented an important trend toward reshaping social relationships, redistributing land rights, and complicating traditional forms of governance. The diversity of migration patterns among communities in Oaxaca have also been found by other researchers (Cohen n.d.).

The extent to which emigrants remained permanently outside of the settlement varied by destination, although similar patterns were found across the sample communities. For instance, those who went to Oaxaca City seemed to be daily or weekly commuters. Those who chose domestic destinations outside of Oaxaca City seemed to be more likely to leave permanently, rarely returning to the community and no longer considered members of the community. In contrast, U.S. migrants tended to either permanently reside in the United States but return on occasion for vacations or holidays, or to engage in circular migration, that is, shifting between living in the United States and Mexico for periods of time. Both patterns of permanent and circular out-migration for Mexico-U.S. migrants also have been confirmed by other researchers (Massey 1987).

Another source of variation in migration concerns the history of outmigration. For example, in some communities, migration began with the Bracero Program (Huayápam), while for other communities, respondents noted that migration began later, during the 1980’s (Capulalpam). A substantial body of research has noted the role that the Bracero Program played in the initiation of Mexican migration to the United States (Bustamante 1973).

Other aspects of migration revealed similar patterns. For instance, nearly all informants indicated that out-migration from the communities of origin resulted from the loss of economic opportunities and jobs within the community. The closings of factories seemed to be important factors in the initiation of outmigration for some communities (San Agustín Etla). Obviously, this confirms the explanation of neoclassical economic theory for migration. Another uniform characteristic of migration is that it is a phenomenon dominated
by men. While our data show that women do migrate, they are far less likely to participate in migration than their male counterparts. Work by Massey and others also highlights the male dominance of migration (though this research has also been critiqued based on their data). In addition, we found a consensus as to how migration has changed in recent years: nearly all noted the fact that men are leaving at earlier ages than in past decades.

The relationship between community demands for labor and migration patterns can influence migrants’ decisions: In San Miguel, migrants usually timed their departures around their obligations for community service, which typically recurs every three years. While the frequency of tequios varied, all of the communities used tequios as a means to muster labor for community projects, especially border maintenance. But all of the communities appeared to have flexible responses to migrants’ absences: family members could fulfill the tequio obligations, fees could be paid to compensate the community for the migrants’ absence, or else the migrant could regain status in the community by fulfilling tequio and service obligations promptly upon return.

Remittances vary from community to community in volume and uses, yet do not vary in their presence. In all communities, respondents indicated that migrants to the United States send remittances to their families. Migrants to Mexican destinations send remittances infrequently, consistent with the permanence of their migrations. What does vary substantially is the extent to which migrants send money directly to community groups. In Yuvila (Santa Catarina Ixtepeji), San Agustín Etla, and the town of Santa Catarina Ixtepeji, migrants send almost no remittances to community groups, while in Tierra Colorada (Santa Catarina Ixtepeji) and San Miguel del Valle migrants send limited amounts of remittances that are primarily used to fund parties. In El Punto (Santa Catarina Ixtepeji), we see somewhat higher levels of remittances going directly to the community through traditional obligations of cooperación.
The most interesting cases of communities accessing remittances appear in Capulalpam and Huayápam, which both receive high levels of remittances from individual migrants directly to the community. The comparison of these two communities provides an interesting window into the ways in which communities organize to create development from migration. In Huayápam, migrants contribute to the community by paying standard community fees and paying money in lieu of performing tequio. Respondents indicate that migrants are no different from any other community members and must pay fees to maintain good standing in the community.

By contrast, in Capulalpam, the responsibilities of migrants with respect to tequio and fees are suspended while the migrants are absent. Instead, community groups (including government committees) contact migrants directly and ask for contributions to projects. In one case, Capulalpam decided to build a chapel to the patron saint on a hill overlooking the town. Residents of Capulalpam contacted migrants in the USA by mail, and even by phone, to inform them of the project and request financial support. The migrants responded with reportedly generous contributions, while residents contributed labor as well as monetary support. Indeed, respondents in Capulalpam consistently indicated that the people are raised to support the community, and continue to do so even if they leave.

These two communities use very different methods for accessing remittances for community development or maintenance projects. However, both communities are successful in getting remittances and both communities are using the remittances to finance projects of their own choosing. In contrast to some research indicating that community projects are often initiated by HTAs in the US, we find that where remittances are used for community projects, the projects and the flows of money are initiated by the community. It is interesting to note that the communities that are successful in capturing remittances have effective organizations for local governance and self-organized groups that are addressing
community issues. But such organizational success does not mean that a community will successfully capture remittances. In the case of San Miguel del Valle, community organizations are very strong and have a history of obtaining goals if consensus can be built. Yet they have not attempted to obtain remittances for community goals even with a large number of outmigrants that remit dependably to their families and to the patron saint’s day festival. And when a HTA in Los Angeles sent funds to assist with church repair, the authorities neglected to acknowledge the contribution even though the project was completed. As a result, respondents in San Miguel indicated that the HTA had lost interest in contributing to the community for anything other than the community festival. In light of this information, it appears that the presence of effective local community organizations and institutions may be a necessary element for capturing remittances, but it is not sufficient.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This preliminary study coincided with other recent studies of migration in Oaxaca in several areas. First, it found notable diversity in migration patterns within and across study communities. Second, it found that economic factors, such as the lack of local employment, represented a recurring motivation for out migration. Third, men migrate more frequently than women, particularly for international migration to the United States. Fourth, remittances are primarily sent to migrants’ families, and secondarily for community projects. When funds are sent to the community, they are most frequently used to help pay for community festivals and sports competitions.

The results also revealed that communities occasionally initiate requests for remittances for specific projects. Moreover, communities with large numbers of migrants make an effort to stay in touch with the migrants and may initiate communications with HTAs. One community in the survey (Capulalpam) sent representatives each year to Mexico
City to collect money for the patron’s saint day fiesta from migrants settled in the city. This data differs from other studies which have found that migrants’ organizations tend to initiate ideas for projects and dictate to communities the purpose of the funding.

With such a small sample, the data cannot show a clear linkage between community organization, development indicators and community capture of remittances. The data provide initial indications that community demands for labor and contributions can influence the timing of migration trips, and community rules about migrants’ rights and membership responsibilities can represent a means of capturing remittances. In addition, communities that capture remittances use them for locally important projects and activities. In subsequent studies, we aim to further explore the relationships between community organization, remittances and development indicators.
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