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## **The Gamble: Circular Mexican Migration and the Return on Remittances**

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Susan Rose and Robert Shaw  
*Dickinson College*

This article examines the role remittances play in three sending communities in the municipality of Peribán, located in the highlands of Michoacán, México. Drawing from fieldwork conducted by Dickinson College's Mexican Mosaics, it discusses the evolution of migration from the region and explores both macro- and micro-level data to better understand the motivations and factors that lead to circular migration and the sending of collective remittances through hometown associations. Debates within the migration literature tend to focus on whether or not remittances are beneficial forces for communities, but the issues are far too complex to characterize remittances simply as positive or negative—or as productive or nonproductive. Actors situated at the national, state, community, and familial levels are likely to hold different perspectives about what is needed and what is considered rational and productive. Although the degree and type of costs and benefits may vary, the case studies of these communities demonstrate the potential of migrant clubs for community development and also the importance of remittances to families and individuals.

Este artículo examina el papel que tienen las remesas en tres comunidades del municipio de Peribán, localizado en las tierras altas de Michoacán, México. A partir del trabajo de campo del proyecto "Mexican Mosaics" de Dickinson College, se discute la evolución de la migración de la región y se exploran los datos en sus diferentes niveles para entender mejor las motivaciones y factores que conducen a la migración circular y al envío de remesas colectivas a través de las asociaciones locales. Los debates dentro de la bibliografía sobre la migración tienden a plantear si las remesas son benéficas para las comunidades o no, pero la cuestión es demasiado compleja para caracterizar las remesas simplemente como positivas o negativas, o como productivas o no productivas. Los participantes a nivel ciudadano, estatal, comunal y familiar probablemente sostendrán perspectivas diferentes sobre lo que se necesita y lo que se considera racional y productivo. Aunque el grado y el tipo de costos y beneficios puedan variar, los es-

tudios de caso de estas comunidades demuestran el potencial que los clubes migratorios tienen en el desarrollo de la comunidad y también la importancia de las remesas para las familias y los individuos.

**Keywords:** Mexico, migration, circular migration, remittances, collective remittances, hometown associations (HTA), migrant clubs, migrant workers, Michoacán.

**Palabras clave:** México, migración, migración circular, remesas, remesas colectivas, asociaciones de ciudad natal, clubes de migrantes, trabajadores migratorios, Michoacán.

All across America, Mexican migrants and immigrants are working and contributing to the economic, cultural, and political life of local communities in the U.S. and Mexico. Migrants and immigrants now play an important role in all regions of the United States, transforming both communities of origin and relocation. While many come as sojourners who plan to return home after a few months or years, others decide to settle. Today, Latinos are the largest minority group in America, with Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans representing two-thirds of Latinos (2000 U.S. Census).

Many of the Mexican migrant and immigrant workers send a portion of their earnings back to their home communities. Representing an estimated 15 percent of their income (Orozco 2005), these remittances average \$200 per month and result in hundreds of millions of dollars being transferred monthly from the U.S. to home communities in Mexico (Bada 2003b). In October 2006, the Inter-American Development Bank reported migrant remittances from the United States to Latin America to reach \$45 billion ("Migrant Remittances" 2006). In the case of Mexico in 2005, the Bank of Mexico estimated remittances at \$16.6 billion, making them one of the most powerful forces in the Mexican economy—surpassing tourism and foreign investment. The vast majority are individual or familial remittances used for consumption: healthcare, repairs on homes, new construction, food, and clothing. Long understood as part of an individual and household strategy, in the last two decades, remittances between the U.S. and Mexico have increasingly been organized by the collective efforts of those involved in hometown associations (HTAs). According to Orozco, as of 2005, there were more than 700 Mexican hometown clubs and associations registered in 30 cities in the United States (Orozco and Welle, 2005).

Descendants of mutual aid societies common in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries, HTAs provide a purpose and space for socializing in the host communities in the U.S. and a connection to communities of origin. Like the earlier mutual aid societies, many of the HTAs initially provided help for sick members and funeral expenses; today, they increasingly support projects in their home communities.

While current debates in the literature on migration and remittances focus on whether they have positive or negative outcomes for families, communities, and societies (O'Neil 2003; Chami et al. 2003; Durand et al. 1996a; Durand and Massey 1992; Gonzalez and Escobar 1990; Dinerman 1978), this research suggests that the issues are far too complex to characterize remittances simply as positive or negative—or as productive or nonproductive. In this paper, we examine both the economic and social motivations for and consequences of the formation of HTAs and the sending of remittances.

This ethnographic study examines patterns of circular migration and the roles remittances play in three sending communities within Peribán, located in the highlands of Michoacán, México. Michoacán was the top receiving state in 2003, taking in approximately \$1.7 billion, almost 16 percent of its 2001 GSP. This represented about \$425 of income per capita (Coronado 2004). Drawing from fieldwork conducted by Dickinson College's Mexican Mosaics between 1998–2004,<sup>1</sup> the study exam-

1. In order to better understand the lives of Mexican migrant workers, the patterns of circular migration, and community reception, faculty at Dickinson College designed a semester-long Mexican Migration Mosaic Project that engaged three faculty and twenty-one students in ethnographic fieldwork and oral history interviewing. As part of a larger project, faculty and students from Dickinson College investigated the role that remittances play in three communities in the municipality of Peribán in the state of Michoacán, Mexico, and two of the receiving communities in the United States: the small town of York Springs, Pennsylvania, and the city of Las Vegas. The study began in the fall of 1998 as part of the first Mexican Migration Mosaic, with a follow-up study five years later in the fall of 2003. By the end of fall 2003, we had conducted some eighty-seven video and audio-taped interviews. We also had more informal conversations with some twenty-five migrant workers, most of whom were undocumented. Because of their status, we only took handwritten notes of those conversations and used pseudonyms. Having discovered during the 1998 Mosaic that most of the remittances sent from the local Mexican store in York Springs to Mexico went to Peribán de Ramos, during a four-week period in October/November 2003, the research team conducted a second phase of the study in Peribán de Ramos, a town of 11,000 located in one of the most productive agricultural regions in Mexico. Formal interviews were conducted with town leaders, such as the president of the municipality, the director of police, local priests and government health workers, avocado orchard and packing plant owners, farmers, construction workers, vendors, and residents. The researchers then selected the towns of Paráztaco and San Francisco Peribán as communities for further study, because of their close proximity and the contrasting effect of remittances in each of these towns. During summer 2004, an additional four weeks were spent primarily in Peribán San Francisco doing ethnographic fieldwork and in Las Vegas by Shaw and Rose.

ines macro-level (national and state economic and demographic data), meso-level (institutional ethnographies), and micro-level (interviews with individuals) data to better understand the variations in remittance use and the organization of the hometown association active in one of the communities.

### Origins of Circular Migration and Hometown Associations

*They leave and they stay there, and never do they return here.*

—Maria Guadalupe Cabellero (Encargada, Paráztaco)

*Some use remittances for a business enterprise, but most waste it . . . they waste it drinking or on entertainment.*

—Fernando Guillen Franco (President of the Municipality of Peribán, Peribán de Ramos)

*They [Mexican Migrants] are people who work; if everyone up north used their money positively for the communities here, community projects would become a priority and would be accomplished faster.*

—Elías Ayala Centeno (Encargada, San Francisco Peribán)

In San Francisco Peribán, Peribán de Ramos, and Paráztaco, like many other towns in the western state of Michoacán, México, migration permeates all aspects of life. The history of mass migration from the region began in the 1940s with the introduction of the *Bracero* program, a U.S.-Mexico migrant worker program that addressed perceived labor shortages in the United States during and after WWII. Michoacán was chosen as a sending state by the Mexican government because of the economic depression facing the region, which was exacerbated in 1943 with the volcanic eruption of Parícutín. Although the long-term effects of the eruption allowed the region to become one of the world's leading areas of avocado production—caused by the fertilizing effects of the volcanic ash—in the short-term the unemployment levels were insurmountable. Guillen Franco, president of the municipality of Peribán, described the economic crisis at the time: “Everyone went to the U.S., to the center of the republic or to other big cities” (see also Ochoa, 2001). For example, Rogelio Pedraza, who was born in Peribán in 1938, was five-years-old the year his father passed away and Parícutín erupted. He went to the United States for the first time when he was eighteen, in 1956, to Chicago as part of the *Bracero* program. There he began working for the Western Electric Company, moving up in the company as he learned more English, but the job was not permanent, like most of the jobs he held in the United States. He went back and forth be-

tween Peribán and the United States for most of his life, until a work-related injury placed him in a wheelchair and he now resides in Peribán de Ramos.

Historians agree that the Bracero Program “helped to establish the major contours of modern Mexican migratory flows” (García y Griego 1996). Begun in 1942, the program officially ended in 1964, but the process of circular migration continued (García y Griego 45). Mexican laborers experienced intense physical work and spent little of the money earned in order to later improve their standard of living at home. “For them, it was about earning in dollars and spending in pesos,” and their plans were always to return to Mexico (Durand 1988). The Bracero program helped foster this pattern of transnational migration because it called for the Mexican labor force to migrate to the United States to work but then required them to return home to live. This was the case for many of the people we interviewed in Peribán.

For example, Andres Avalos Estrada, the patriarch of the Avalos Sánchez family, migrated to the United States a number of times but has spent the last twenty-five years working for the town of Peribán in water management. He and his wife, who died in 1988, had twelve children who lived to adulthood. Of the twelve children, all five of their sons have migrated to the United States at least once. Although migration has led to the separation of this tight-knit family, it has consistently been used as an economic strategy in helping to maintain their livelihood.

Peribán continues to experience a steady increase in migration levels. Economics is still the driving force, though other social pressures, such as viewing migration as a rite of passage, serve as motivators as well. Subsistence-level jobs comprise the majority of employment opportunities in Peribán, such as avocado picking and packing, and migration to the U.S. remains one of the few options available to those who wish to improve their economic status. A worker in the avocado fields in the Peribán region can earn about \$18 a week, whereas those working in the avocado-packing plants will earn about \$94 a week. In the United States, migrant workers picking fruit in the Pennsylvania orchards average \$200–\$300 a week. According to interviews with some fifty migrant workers in ten different camps in Adams County, Pennsylvania, and from work-history data collected by Adams County Rural Opportunities, the average paycheck of a farm laborer did not vary greatly from Florida to New Jersey to Pennsylvania. The migrant farm laborer earning \$250 a week has a salary fourteen times greater than those picking avocados in Mexico and two and a half times greater than those packing the fruit in Mexico.

As a consequence, out-migration remains a characteristic feature of

many towns in Peribán. Several local government officials suggest that 20–30 percent of the population of Peribán may be living in the U.S.<sup>2</sup> As people, information, goods, money, customs, and culture circulate between towns and cities in the U.S. and Mexico, communities on both sides of the border are being transformed—and becoming increasingly transnational. By this we mean that many migrants and immigrants are building “social fields that cross geographic, cultural and political borders . . . . An essential element . . . is the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants sustain in both home and host societies” (Basch et al. 1994, 6; Portes 1997). Although immigration has a long history of people and goods moving back and forth between countries, the development of the term *transnational* is useful in identifying what is new in these communities. As studies by Portes (1997), Basch et al. (1994), Glick-Schiller et al. (1992), and others show, the numbers of people involved in transnational activities—economic, political, religious, and social—represent a significant proportion of the population of both sending and receiving communities. Moreover, the nearly instantaneous communication facilitated by e-mail, Instant Messenger, affordable phone calls, and the accessibility of transportation has meant that people stay more connected and are able to move more fluidly between countries. Finally, Portes makes the argument that the “cumulative character of the process [of circular migration] makes participation “normative” within certain immigrant groups” (Portes 1997, 813); certainly this is the case with Mexican migrants. We found, as did Massey and Goldring (1994), that migration north to work is the “thing to do,” especially for young men, though increasingly more women are going north as well, often to be with their husbands.

One of the greatest impacts of this phenomenon is the massive influx of money from the United States to Mexico used not only for consumption, but in some cases, for public projects. Approximately one-third of households in Peribán de Ramos are completely dependent on remittances, and some 20,000 people receive remittances in one form or another. In Peribán de Ramos the average amount a receiving household collects is \$187 dollars per month (Leco 2003).

2. This figure is provided by the Mexican Government 2000 census information. It is highly likely that this information includes some or all of the migrant population. It is probable that the government of the municipality encouraged families to include those in the U.S., for the purposes of national aid. Furthermore, from the employment information gathered at the same time, the workforce is only 6,617 people out of 11,500 from ages 14–64. (Don Fernando Guillen Franco, Informal Conversation with Robert Shaw, 11–10–03, Alfonso Vazquez, informal conversation with Robert Shaw, 11–17–03 (both are government officials).

## Remittances

An important feature of Mexican migration between the U.S. and Mexico is the sheer quantity of money transferred from migrants to their communities of origin. The money sent from migrants in the United States amounted to some \$16.5 billion for the first ten months of 2005, indicating a 20 percent increase on remittances from 2004 (Banco de Mexico 2005). According to a study commissioned by the Inter-American Development Bank and Pew Hispanic Center, the figures used by the Mexican Central Bank underestimate the level of remittances by 20 percent (Lee 2003). Remittances remain one of the most powerful economic forces in Mexico's economy. The beneficial effects of these remittances, however, have been debated by researchers.

Some analysts worry that migration delays the structural changes needed for development. The argument follows that migration undermines local development by the type of spending that occurs with migrant dollars, because incomes are raised but institutional capacity is not (O'Neil 2003). In the case of Michoacán, migrant dollars are concentrated in 56 of 113 municipalities, according to figures in 2002. In these areas, more than two thirds of families are dependent on remittances (Lopez 2003). Most researchers agree that the majority (55–75 percent) of the money sent from the U.S. is used in current consumption—durable/nondurable goods and services—and is not directed toward investing or savings (Durand et al. 1996a; Meyers 1998; Chami et al. 2003).

It could be argued that this money creates an artificial economy, that would collapse if the money flow from the U.S. were to cease. In his analysis of indigenous communities in Mexico, Reichert (1982) argues that remittances create a dependency on a foreign market and business cycle that will eventually lead to a community's cultural collapse. He dubs this the "migrant syndrome." Durand et al. (1996a) provide examples of other researchers drawing similar conclusions, naming migration a "dangerous dependence" and an "addiction" (Weist 1979; Stuart and Kearney 1981).

The literature on remittances presents contradictory findings and perspectives (Durand and Massey 1992). Some studies conclude that money sent from the U.S. is damaging to Mexican local economies. For example, Dinerman (1978), Gonzalez and Escobar (1990), Cornelius (1990a; 1990b), and Lopez (1986) argue remittances are spent in "non-productive" ends: family maintenance and health; the purchase, construction, or remodeling of homes; and the purchase of consumer goods (Durand et al. 1992). But Durand and Massey cite several other studies that counter this view. Research by Trigueros and Rodriguez (1988) indicate that in the town of Alvaro Obregon, 30 percent of migrants in-



vest earnings in some way. This is similar to the level of investment cited in a study by Escobar and Martínez (1990) on manual labor in Guadalajara (Durand and Massey 1992).

In the end, Durand et al. conclude in their 1996 study that remittances indirectly encourage productive growth at both the community and national level (Durand et al. 1996a). They show how spending on current consumption encourages entrepreneurs within Mexico to invest in plants, equipment, and labor, and argue that added income earned by workers spurs a second round of economic activity. "Even activities such as the extravagant consumption of beer, often cited as a particularly egregious example of migrant earnings being frittered away, leads to the addition of labor and equipment to factories owned by *Cevecería Cuahutemoc* and *Cevecería Modelo*" (Durand et al. 1996a, 428). They estimate that with the increased economic activity that results from remittances, money sent back from the United States actually yields three to four times more money in additional commercial activity (Durand et al. 1996a). Likewise, Stahl and Arnold document positive multiplier effects (1986) in their study on Asian development. Stahl and Habib (1989) estimate for every dollar remitted in Bangladesh during a one-decade span, 1.24 dollars were generated in this "consumption effect." In the case of Mexico, Adelman and Taylor (1990) report a consumption effect of 3.2 dollars for remittances.

Xóchitl Bada presents a similar argument in her study of migrant clubs. She describes the individual remittances sent by the migrants who are in the United States as "an indirect motor for regional economic development" (Bada 2003a, 8). She continues to argue that they relieve stress on government services for community members, allowing it to reallocate its resources in other directions. In this way, remittances, or *Migradollars* as they are often called, can stimulate demand in diverse sectors of the economy and, as a result, have a considerable impact on employment in the industrial and service sectors.

Clearly actors have different definitions of what they consider productive or unproductive depending on their disciplines and position. Those situated at the national, state, community, and familial levels are likely to hold different perspectives and priorities about what is needed and what is considered rational and productive.

### **Collective Remittances and Hometown Associations**

Although spending on current consumption should not be viewed as damaging to a local economy, direct investing—or saving that prompts investment—is preferable from the perspective of community development and economic growth. To encourage investment in community

projects, several states in Mexico have utilized and begun to encourage the collective remittances of migrant organizations as funding for public projects.

The formal organizational structure that encourages the use of migrant money in public works is possible principally through the existence of migrant organizations comprised of Mexicans living in the U.S. with a shared community of origin. According to Xóchitl Bada, these clubs mostly originate through soccer teams and religious groups of migrants in the U.S. (2003a). Although migrant organizations have existed in the U.S. since the 1950s, the first hometown associations developed in the 1970s as flows of migrants increased (Lanly and Valenzuela, 2004). Originally these groups functioned as social networks with the purpose of maintaining cultural values and customs from generation to generation and providing basic insurance to those who became ill or died. As communication between migrants and their hometowns increased and these groups became more organized in the 1990s, the groups began to send collective remittances back to their home communities (Valenzuela 2004).

One of the thousands of migrant groups that exist across the U.S. is the subject of the PBS documentary, "The Sixth Section." Migrants living in Newburgh, New York, from Boqueron, Zacatecas—to the north of Michoacán—formed Grupo Unión for the sole purpose of sending money home for community projects. With donations from migrants, Grupo Unión provided the funds to build a baseball stadium, equip a town band, and drill a well in their desert home community over 3,000 miles away (Riviera 2003).

In the last decade, hundreds of migrant organizations provided similar support for their communities of origin, which prompted the Mexican government to take a more active role in encouraging collective migrant investment. In several states across Mexico, the national, state, and local governments are collaborating with migrant organizations in the United States. Some of these migrant groups have existed for more than 30 years, and several have long histories of collective investment. The collaborative program named *Three for One* was established with the intent of increasing investment and developing public infrastructure. For every dollar donated by migrant organizations, an additional dollar was given by the Mexican local government, state government, and national government (García Zamora 2003). Money has been invested in projects such as potable water, sewage systems, schools, recreational facilities, highways, roads, and the revitalization of churches and plazas. Bada notes that the migrants are often able to exert more influence and achieve greater status from the outside by contributing these collective funds for community projects. García Zamora writes of the inauguration of the

Three for One program in Jiquilpan, Michoacán, in July 2002. During 2000, migrant groups collected about \$1 million for 66 projects, with each level of government matching every dollar to create better systems of potable water, and better roads and to repair several churches, all of which benefited some 103,000 people (2003). In Guanajuato, HTAs have sent money to fund the creation of job-generating manufacturing plants in their home communities (Lowell and de la Garza 2000).

In Michoacán, collective remittances have provided donations of toys and necessities for children, scholarships for children of few resources, construction of homes for the elderly, and other public projects such as buying busses and paying for recreational parks, cemeteries, and electricity grids (Bada 2003a). Reporter Israel Estrada, speaking about the municipalities surrounding Peribán, stated, "Here, for example, in some municipalities they are already putting in place programs of migrant economic participation, like the Three for One". The migrants send money and the sum of the money is matched by the municipality, the state, and the federal governments."

Some researchers have cited desires to be more visible, to establish identity, and to remain informed about the events in their community of origin as reasons for migrants' participation in these HTAs (Bada 2003a; Lanly and Valenzuela 2004). In a survey of the migrant population, García Zamora found great satisfaction with the government program boding well for its future (2003). As Kevin O'Neil (2003) of the Migration Policy Institute argues, remittance studies need to consider the impact not only on households but also on communities. Also important is an analysis of how effects from remittances change over time. Research continues to show that remittances are spent mainly on housing, consumer goods, everyday expenses, education, healthcare, retirement, and debt maintenance. Once some of the basic needs of families are met, however, people may become more capable of investment.

Many researchers have recognized the development potential for migrant organizations (see, for example, Orozco 2005; Chami et al. 2003; Lowell and de la Garza 2000; and Meyers 1998), especially given the growth of HTAs in the past decade. Four hundred Mexican HTAs were registered in the U.S. in 1998, and by 2005 this number had increased to 700, which does not account for hundreds of nonregistered groups (Lowell and de la Garza 2000; Bada, 2003b). Hometown associations are heavily concentrated in Los Angeles and Chicago. In Los Angeles, migrants from Jalisco, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, and Oaxaca have formed migrant federations, an umbrella group for several smaller HTAs (Zabin 1998). In Chicago, federations from Michoacán, Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Oaxaca, Zacatecas, Guerrero, Durango, and Guanajuato are all documented (Bada 2003b). Clubs within these federations work to support

their hometowns primarily by funding community projects (Lowell and de la Garza, 2000).

### **The Study: Description of Research Sites**

The three communities described in the following section are located in central Michoacán in the municipality of Peribán. The communities—Peribán de Ramos, Paráztaco, and San Francisco Peribán—all lie within twenty miles of one other and are greatly affected by migration, but they vary in size, affluence, and involvement with HTAs and collective remittances.

#### *Peribán de Ramos*

Peribán de Ramos is the hometown of the majority of the Mexican migrants and immigrants now living in York Springs, Pennsylvania.<sup>3</sup> Many maintain constant contact with their families in Peribán, and an informal network has been established where potential migrants receive information about work opportunities in Pennsylvania (and elsewhere) and the latest conditions and problems crossing the border. Considerable sums of money are sent back to Mexico, and some migrants are constructing new houses in their hometowns with earnings from the U.S. Peribán de Ramos serves as the *cabecera* municipal, or county seat of the municipality of Peribán, in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. With 11,200 residents, Peribán de Ramos is primarily agricultural, producing avocados and a wide range of fruits and vegetables. While the region

3. Dickinson's Mexican Migration Project began research in Adams County, Pennsylvania in 1998 and then expanded to Peribán. Adams County lies some eighteen miles from Dickinson's campus. It has long been one of the most productive fruit growing regions in the United States. Local growers of apples, peaches, pears, and other orchard fruits have historically depended upon migrant workers to pick their crops cheaply and efficiently throughout the region. In the last decade, many of the Mexican workers have decided to settle permanently in the small towns that dot the county, particularly in municipalities such as Biglerville, York Springs, and Gettysburg. These permanent residents are in the process of establishing Mexican American communities, a development that has introduced the region to new degrees of linguistic, racial, religious, and cultural diversity. Increasingly, families, as well as single men, are settling and finding work in the food processing and poultry plants, egg factories, and construction. According to the U.S. Census data, there were 1,216 Hispanics in Adams County in 1990 and almost triple that number in 2000 with 3,323 persons of Hispanic or Latino origin out of a total population of 91,292 residents. While 95.4 percent of the Adams County population is white, 3.6 percent is Hispanic or Latino. Of this 3.6 percent, 72 percent (2,366) are of Mexican origin. York Springs has a total population of 574 residents; the Hispanic population is 141 people, with 138 of those originating from Mexico (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). When examining money orders sent from York Springs to México in 1998, it was discovered that the vast majority went to the town of Peribán de Ramos.

once specialized in sugar cane, it now cultivates raspberry, strawberry, blackberry, peach, corn, tomato, and most importantly avocado crops, which by far provide the biggest source of regional employment. Peribán de Ramos boasts a high school, both public and private secondary and elementary schools, and several sports fields, including an indoor soccer stadium. There is a government health center staffed by several doctors and rural health workers. Several private medical practitioners and some dentists have opened practices, and concentrated in the center of town are ten pharmacies. The central plaza—surrounded by two Catholic churches, a dance club, and several family-owned restaurants—is lined by benches and filled with beautiful flowers and a statue of St. Francis of Assisi.

The nearest major city to this rural Mexican town, Uruapan, is over an hour away. Several of the roads that lead away from Peribán are still not paved. Whereas Peribán de Ramos itself has electricity and potable water, several of the 33 communities in the municipality of some 25,000 inhabitants do not. Out-migration, most commonly in the form of circular migration, is common; although subsistence-level living is possible, in order to advance economically many have to go north to earn money.

#### *San Francisco Peribán*

Although San Francisco Peribán, founded by pre-Hispanic Purepecha Indians, is one of the oldest towns in the region, it has long been surpassed in growth and size by its neighbor Peribán de Ramos. San Francisco Peribán, with a population of 2,500 residents, is split by a two-lane highway running from Uruapan, the closest major city, 40 miles to the east. In the center of town lies a well-kept plaza, a simple government office building, and a newly renovated church and rectory. Most of the roads in San Francisco Peribán are paved; however, fifty yards from the plaza in two separate directions, one encounters dirt roads lined with houses for a short distance, and beyond those, orchards and farm land. The town has both private and public primary and secondary schools, a government health center staffed by one medical student during her year of fieldwork, one private medical practitioner, and a privately owned pharmacy. There are five convenience stores, a paper store, and three restaurants, two of which open only on weekends. The town has two basketball courts, a well-kept soccer field, and a bullring that is currently under construction. The employment opportunities mirror those found in Peribán de Ramos: year-round subsistence-level wages are earned from avocado picking or other farm labor and a limited number of jobs paying slightly higher wages at two avocado-packing plants in San Francisco Peribán.

*Paráztaco*

Paráztaco is significantly smaller, less developed, and more isolated than its neighbors, Peribán de Ramos and San Francisco Peribán. Built on a mountainside, the town is bisected by a road that leads farther up the mountain. Although it is only ten miles from Peribán, it takes forty minutes to travel the partially paved, mostly dirt road that is strewn with potholes, and includes a dangerously steep incline. The stretch of paved road that runs through town was laid last November 2003 (Sánchez 2003b). Fifteen years ago, Paráztaco received running water; and three years ago, it received potable running water. Electricity arrived about five years ago. The village has a two-room primary/secondary school, a one-room health center, a small store, a basketball court, and a soccer field. The wood houses are lined with tin roofs; most floors are made of dirt; and the townspeople rely on outhouses. María Guadalupe Sánchez Caballero is the elected leader of the town and the only female community leader in the whole municipality of Peribán.

**Collective Remittances in San Francisco Peribán  
and Their Absence in Paráztaco and Peribán de Ramos**

Although San Francisco Peribán, Peribán de Ramos, and Paráztaco lie within twenty miles of one another, they represent very different patterns of circular migration and remittance reception in the Peribán region of Michoacán. María Guadalupe Sánchez Caballero, the town leader of the very small and impoverished community of Paráztaco, says that 90 of 293 Paráztaco residents are in the U.S., but few send back money in any form. Yet, when asked if she feels the migration is a benefit for Paráztaco, she replied, "Well, yes because some of them are raising their houses of wood . . . and little by little they are sending material to the mother so that they can live well." The other main use for money earned in the U.S. is for healthcare. Sánchez gave the example of one family. "They had to operate on her, and the husband had to go to the U.S., because here there is no where to earn money." No collective remittances are invested in the town, according to Sánchez, because economically even those in the U.S. do not have the resources.

Likewise, the city of Peribán de Ramos does not receive collective remittances for public projects. Many people send remittances back to their families or save up their money and bring it back home with them, but no organization funnels back collective remittances. President Guillen commented that

Some use it to make some type of business venture, but the majority, practically not, or at times the people come from there [U.S.] and they bring their money.

They don't work and they spend their money on their house or perhaps on their family. They spend it on their drugs or on their diversion and then they return north.

Although the president clearly states that remittances are not being invested or saved, his response to the following question is telling, "Do you believe the money that comes from there is a benefit for Peribán?": "Of, course. All of the money is a benefit, one way or another, it is a benefit."

Hometown associations and cooperatives, however, do send back collective remittances that contribute to the building of major projects in San Francisco Peribán. Visible on the church wall is a physical tribute to these migrants. A plaque, dated 1987, gives thanks to "the children of San Francisco" living in the United States, for their generosity and support in constructing the church and tower.

Testimony of Thanks: With the time we formed the history of our towns. We matured and we brought ourselves closer to our destiny. To the absent children of the town of San Francisco Peribán, Mich, residents of the U.S.A. Perennial gratitude for your generous cooperation with the parish projects especially for the public clock which will mark for us the end of our afflictions and tasks. San Francisco Peribán, Michoacán, 3 of October of 1987.

—Town and Pastor Luin Guerra Vargas

Two HTAs now support the town of San Francisco Peribán, and the group referenced on the church tower—*Los Hijos de San Francisco*—has long supported community activities in San Francisco. The questions under investigation are what role the hometown associations and collective remittances play in San Francisco Peribán, why they exist in this town, and why they are absent in Peribán de Ramos and Paráztaco—the former community being both larger and more affluent and the latter community being much smaller and more impoverished than San Francisco Peribán.

Coming together to raise funds for the building or repair of a church or plaza is common in many Mexican communities. People in San Francisco Peribán have a long history of being willing to give of their own resources for the common good. Still within the embrace of a *gemeinschaft* community, people know one another. Most could tell you the name of anyone in the community, particularly those of the same generation; if not, they know who their families are. Virtually all of San Francisco Peribán's inhabitants grew up in the town, though a few spouses have married in from neighboring towns and villages. Its members can count on support from large family networks and lifelong friendships.

As people pass by one another in San Francisco Peribán, they smile and say "Adios." This is a way of acknowledging friends and acquaintances.

tances. There are no strangers living in San Francisco. Watching out for one another is a central feature of life there. Characteristic of such trust and economic cooperation are the collectives people join. As is the case in many developing countries, women in SFP belong to micro-economic collectives, formed for the purpose of saving money and serving as a mutual aid society. Each week, ten women contribute money to a common fund, and each month, a different member receives the savings. Such community participation is critical to the success of public projects within the town. For small endeavors, a group of individuals will organize a *kermesse*. This fundraising activity involves preparation of traditional Mexican foods that are sold for the purpose of funding some positive end. Typically one hundred to two hundred people will attend a kermesse in San Francisco and the success level is greater if the kermesse accompanies an activity such as a dance. The funds gathered at a kermesse average \$100–\$200. For larger projects, the community gives voluntary donations, sometimes in the form of labor or materials. For the construction of the church, community members gave days of voluntary labor in what are called *faenas*. For some projects, such as potable water, the community votes on a tax per household, usually with three income brackets.

#### *The Children of San Francisco*

Those living in San Francisco Peribán, regardless of whether or not they have been to the United States, refer to their migrant community in Los Angeles as a *medio pueblo*—half the town. Migrants in Los Angeles are concentrated in the city of San Fernando. Most migrants from San Francisco Peribán travel first to L.A., and many remain there for their entire time in the U.S. However, the town does have some migrants in Oregon, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. A shared perception among townspeople is that 50 percent of males age 18–25 from San Francisco Peribán are in the United States. Female migration statistics are less well-known, but of the same age group, most believe that as many as 20 percent are in the United States. Town officials and former migrants themselves estimate the number San Franciscan expatriots to be equal to or higher than the current population living in San Francisco.

The majority of migrant remittances flowing to San Francisco are spent on consumption. Most migrants who remit are supporting their immediate family, either their parents and siblings or their spouse and children. For example, Mauricio sends weekly sums of \$200 to his wife Dolores for the support of their six children, five of whom are in school. Dolores says this money pays for daily expenses, mainly food and allowances for the children.

Investment, however, is evident. During the late 1980s, according



to one community member, the quality of life and incomes in San Francisco began to rise. Reina Aguilar attributes this to an agricultural shift from sugar cane to avocado. Also, a division of land occurred during this same time, and land that was not suitable for the production of sugar cane was fertile for avocado orchards. Furthermore, the land that was controlled by a few patronos was now more evenly distributed through the society. Gonzalo Ayala, a migrant from the Bracero period during WWII and current owner of several avocado orchards, confirmed this shift and stated that those who bought land during this period purchased it with capital earned in the U.S.

More recent examples of invested remittances are visible in the current construction of seven homes in San Francisco, what will be a paper store on the plaza, and the addition of a second floor to a ballroom facility rented for *Quienceneras* and weddings. The paper store and ballroom hope to generate as much income as the largest food store in town. This store, which is now twice the size of other corner shops in San Francisco and significantly more profitable, was originally built through the investment of remittances.

#### *Migrant Organization in Los Angeles*

San Francisco stands alone in the municipality of Peribán as the only town receiving collective remittances. Currently, two migrant clubs operate in the U.S. and both send collective remittances to San Francisco Peribán. The Los Angeles migrant group traces its roots to fulfilling a community need—providing emergency funds for the repatriation of the dead in the case of a migrant death in the United States. Although this remains its primary purpose, the organization has expanded beyond a mutual-aid society to provide support for projects and activities within San Francisco.

The best accounts of the history of the Los Angeles migrant club indicate migrants in the late 1980s began collecting donations for an emergency migrant fund. The precursor to this was a collective donation, from the same group of migrants, for the restoration of the church in 1987. Before a massive community effort took place, including private donations, kermessees, dances and faenas, the church was constructed of mud and wood. Although it remains unclear how much money the migrants provided for this effort, it is certain that they gave a significant portion of the funds for the church and rectory and donated the clock on the church tower, a piece worth several thousand dollars. Señor Esquivel Alvarado, the town mayor during the time of the migrant club's formation, notes that they formed a formal committee in 1990 to manage their activities and funds.

The committee transformed the organization in the decade that followed. Going house to house to collect individual donations from San

Franciscans, the committee organized bimonthly kermesses and dances, featuring typical food and music from Michoacán. This transition took place in 1993 and remains their method of collecting funds. Like earlier mutual-aid societies whose original objective was to pay for burials, their migrant support has expanded to fly family members to the United States if someone who died did not wish to be returned to Mexico. They will also pay for the return transportation of a migrant who loses a family member in San Francisco Peribán. These services are not limited to the club's participants but provided to all of those who are from San Francisco. Support for the town of San Francisco has also expanded, and each year since the mid-1990s, the migrants donate the funds from one September kermesse to the town fiesta held on October 4th. The priest is charged with managing these funds, which are brought to him each year by the secretary of the migrant club. Most of the money goes to contracting a particularly talented mariachi band from Purepeño. Support for San Francisco has also been offered in sponsoring promising students who are considering higher education. This organization has only just begun to provide funds for public projects in San Francisco, donating some \$10,000 to the construction of a town bullring, following delays associated with a lack of confidence in the local authorities.

The cost of constructing the bullring in San Francisco Peribán is estimated at \$155,000. It is important to note the productive nature of this project. By renting this facility for political activities and social gatherings, and by charging admission to public events such as bullfighting, the town officials hope the bullring will provide future funding for other projects in San Francisco, such as repairing the town's water system and equipping the health clinic. To complete the ten-foot brick wall defining the bullring in the first project phase, the officials asked townspeople for donations. Although for some town-funded events and projects, a community decision dictates the amount collected per household, in this case the donations were purely voluntary. A list detailing the amount given by each family was posted on the government building with the purpose of providing an incentive for giving. To begin the second phase, the town was expecting a substantial contribution by the migrant club in Los Angeles. This expectation stemmed from an announcement by the president of the Los Angeles club at the last town fiesta promising a donation of \$6,000 from his organization; a variety of circumstances, however, postponed this donation.

There is a dispute in San Francisco between a group backed by the local priest—who was assigned to the parish three years ago after the death of the pastor of San Francisco for the previous twelve years—and the town officials. The current priest would like to see more money from the proceeds of certain events during the town fiesta go to the operat-

ing costs of the church. Although the town voted to spend the money on a new water tank and further work on potable water, several community members are frustrated. They question what the town officials have done with the money and why some projects need refunding. A member of the newly formed committee on potable water admits this money was misspent by the old committee, but he vouches for the personal integrity of the committee's members and credits the misspending to miscalculation of the usage rate of the town's water supply. For a certain subset of the San Francisco population, this dispute has evolved into a general lack of confidence in the town officials, particularly the town manager.

From the perspective of the town priest, the migrant organization requires detailed spending records. He mentions the difficulties he's had in the past working with the authorities to provide the migrants with these records for the October 4th town fiesta. The priest continues, "One doesn't have much trust/confidence in the authorities; they have a bad reputation. If there is money destined for the bullring, the migrants fear that this money will go to negative ends."

The town officials and their supporters recognize the lack of confidence, but adamantly insist it is unfounded. They also acknowledge that the delay or withdrawal in the original offer from the Los Angeles organization is related to this lack of confidence. One community member states that a number of the migrants have called Señor Elias personally to state their confidence in him as a leader and explain that it is only some of the members in the club's committee that think otherwise. She suggests that supporters of the priest told the migrants about corruption in the town manager's team. Another town official also acknowledged that there was a misunderstanding by some individuals in Los Angeles "because of the lies that some people here [in San Francisco Peribán] have told them, that we are working poorly or that we are not organized." The town manager pins the blame squarely on the priest. He states, "There has always been bad information on the part of the priest that there are no good managers [of money]." Señor Elias continues by saying he and his team have done more with the resources that were available to them than anyone expected.

The Los Angeles organization did finally become involved in funding the bullring, but only at the very end of the current manager's tenure. It will be up to the new leader to manage the funds. It is likely the club will continue to be involved in public projects, and the presence of a federation of similar clubs in Los Angeles would help to encourage this activity. Zabin and RabAdán (1998) suggest Michoacanos in Los Angeles have been unable to form a federation linking its smaller clubs because of a conflict among three actors: the national party, an opposition

government in Michoacán, and the left-leaning migrants sympathetic to their state government. If there had been an umbrella organization, the migrant club may have had a longer history of involvement in productive community projects. Now that the migrant organization is involved, however, town officials are discussing future projects. The priest too plans on pursuing the migrants' help in paving a road by the church, restoring the town graveyard, and refurbishing the town plaza.

*Migrant Organization in Las Vegas*

Migration to Las Vegas by individuals from San Francisco Peribán began only in 1999 and has already created a new migrant network. The cousin of the town manager, Marco Centeno, was the first to migrate to Las Vegas. Centeno was married to an American citizen who had family in Las Vegas who were able to arrange better work for him. After a year, Marco found work for Adán, who had already left Los Angeles due to gang pressures. In the next four years, this network brought eighteen more of their friends and family members to the city. All but one of these San Franciscans was living in Los Angeles. The reasons for leaving L.A. were mostly economic; however, some spoke of frustrations with the intense competition for status among members of the town, and the lack of privacy by living with so many people who had common community ties. All but a few of the twenty new migrants work in construction. They are all married and all but one live with their spouse in Las Vegas. In September 2003, these migrants organized to form a hometown association, with the sole purpose of providing financial support to projects in San Francisco Peribán.

According to interviews with those involved in San Francisco Peribán and Las Vegas, this organization formed because the town manager made a request to his brother in Las Vegas to form a group of San Franciscans who would send collective remittances to support the construction of the bullring. This family connection and trust between the town manager and the migrants in Las Vegas was critical to the successful formation of a migrant organization. Conditions were also right for the formation of such a group. Because this group moved to Las Vegas with the help of previous migrants—mostly Adán and Marco—and because the group is comprised of a close-knit network of family and friends, the group was already gathering daily after work and every weekend. The individuals from San Francisco depended upon each other for social support. As Aguilera and Massey (2003) argue, such interpersonal networks are a major source of social capital. Moreover, their common experience in Los Angeles exposed them to the workings of a group that was making a difference for migrants and the people of their hometown. And finally, an umbrella organization for migrant organizations from Michoacán

had been long established in Nevada and provided the perfect conduit for a new hometown association from Michoacán to take advantage of a government matching funds program.

The United Association of Michoacanos in Nevada is an umbrella organization that has the primary function of integrating migrant Michoacanos with their communities of origin. According to the Secretary General, Reveriano Orozco Sánchez, the organization formed eight years ago and was registered as an established club in the state of Nevada three years ago. The organization does not charge dues from its twenty-four clubs, representing twenty-four different communities or municipalities, but rather asks for donations from migrant business owners in Nevada. The funds gathered by each club go directly to projects of the club's choosing, although the organization encourages productive investments. To form a migrant club representing an individual community, the organization asks the group's members to register, form a committee, select one member of the committee to attend a general assembly meeting once a month, and document weekly activities with the main office. There are no requirements for the level of participation of its clubs. The biggest advantage to a club being registered with this organization is that the club becomes eligible for a government matching funds program, which traces its roots to the 1990s.

During the Salinas administration in Mexico, there was a dramatic shift in policy toward Mexicans abroad in the United States. Consulate offices were reinvigorated and several new programs with substantial resources were allocated for Mexicans migrants (Zabin and RabAdán 1998). One of these programs, established in 1993, allocated matching funds from the Mexican federal and state governments for money raised by HTAs for approved public works projects in their hometowns (Goldring 2003). This project, which became known as the *two-for-one program*, was scrapped in 1995 partly due to government turnover and the financial crisis that marked the first months of the Zedillo administration; however, Zacatecas was able to continue the program through special agreements between different government actors and migrant organizations (Goldring 2002, 2003). In 1997, Zacatecas began to incorporate money at the municipality level in the matching funds program, renaming it the *three-for-one program*. By 2003, the Mexican states of Guerrero, Jalisco, Guanajuato San Luis Potosí, and Michoacán had all adopted the program (Bada 2003a).

In July 2002, the government of Michoacán resurrected the matching funds program. During this year, the project totaled \$4,000,000, funding 64 projects in 30 *municipios*. In 2003 funding was reduced by the federal and state government resulting in a project total—including all participating parties—of \$3,000,000; however, the project funded the

same number of public works and expanded the number of municipios to 48. Projected funding for 2004 was \$6,500,000 pesos (Martinez 2004). In order to qualify for this program, a migrant club must be a member of a registered organization with the Mexican consulate. The United Association of Michoacanos in Nevada provided this opportunity to the migrants from San Francisco Peribán.

Although Mauricio and Adán began to represent the San Francisco Club at general assembly meetings during the winter of 2003, the San Franciscanos did not begin organizing until September 2003. Throughout the fall and into the winter, the group raised over \$9,500 for the building. In June 2004, the three levels of government matched this funding and provided just under \$30,000 for the project in San Francisco Peribán, bringing the total contribution made possible by migrants in Las Vegas to almost \$40,000. This money, along with a \$20,000 contribution from the Corona beer company will fund the second stage of building, adding a permanent seat structure and roof for the arena.

To raise the \$9,000, the migrant club in Las Vegas, under the direction of Adán, worked several weekends a month. During large events organized by other clubs from Michoacanos Unidos de Nevada (United Michoacanos of Nevada), such as soccer tournaments, dances, and cultural days, the migrants from San Francisco prepared kermessees and, in similar fashion to migrants from Los Angeles, sold typical Michoacano food, such as enchiladas, pozole, tamales, and panuelos. On weekends when there were no large social gatherings of migrants, the club from San Francisco held car washes, usually generating about \$500. During the year the migrants also held raffles for used cars, TVs, and other items.<sup>4</sup> The final contribution also included personal donations from Adán and Mauricio amounting to \$2000 each.

When asked why they came together to collect funds to send back home for projects, the initial responses suggested that the most basic motivation for forming the migrant club and for participating in fundraising activities was a desire by those from San Francisco to help their hometown and to make the place better for future generations. In initial conversations with members of the Las Vegas club, they indicated that there was no special recognition upon their return to their hometown beyond a verbal acknowledgment at the next town fiesta. That it didn't accord them higher status when they returned was not an issue. Their major motivation, they said, was to aid their town—but it also became clear that in doing so, they felt more connected and better about themselves.

4. As Goldring (1998) observed, the women do much of the preparation for the events, such as preparing and serving food, but the men are the ones in charge of the budget and political organization of the club.

Arturo, who returned from Las Vegas in January 2004 and plans to make another trip north in the fall, clarified:

The club is important for what you lose. For not having papers, for the obstacles they place in front of you, for the police or simply for the poor treatment by some awful *patrones*. Yes, the man that goes up north loses much of his moral value. True, it makes one very sad. You simply feel good in being able to help the people that are from your town or your home. It's a simple pretty satisfaction in a country that doesn't allow you to do much.

As Margarita Mooney asserted in her analysis of migrant networks and remittances, "Migrants who are embedded in social networks of other migrants in the United States rely on their hometowns as the source of their identity and remittances are used to signify continuing membership in the community of origin" (2003, 1149). Migrant and immigrant workers who frequently feel alienated and isolated in their host communities, often welcome the opportunity to stay connected with one another and their home communities, to reaffirm their roots, and to continue their tradition of contributing. This was certainly the case for the migrants of Las Vegas who described the organizing for the benefit of their community a few weekends a month as a very positive activity. Fundraising for the collective remittances represented a group effort by people who had relatively decent paying jobs, mostly in construction in Las Vegas, and who liked to come together to socialize and organize for the good of the larger community. The collective remittances served to complement, but not substitute for, the remittances they individually saved or sent back to their families.

#### *Status of the Hometown Associations*

The strong relationship between brothers, Elias Ayala and Adán Ayala, was critical in the success of the migrants from Las Vegas. The familiar ties among family members who were leaders in both communities ensured trust and confidence. Reveriano Orozco, director of the umbrella organization Michoacanos Unidos de Nevada, commented that the close contact between the club and the authorities in San Francisco "helped them greatly to advance." Elias Ayala also argued that his contacts within the Mexican government also helped them secure the three-for-one money. In comparison to many of the HTAs that tend to organize after migrants have settled in an area for ten or more years (Bada 2003b), the Las Vegas club organized early on, among people who had been in Las Vegas for only five years or less. It helped that the majority of these Mexican workers had lived and worked first in other places in the United States and were familiar with U.S. culture, had relatively decent paying jobs ranging from \$300 to \$1000 per week, and were living with their

families up north so they did not have as great a need to send money back to support their wives and children on a regular basis. They also had arrived recently enough to still be very connected to their hometown but were long enough in the United States to establish a network of people who had the time and resources to come together to celebrate and organize.

Whether the club continues to raise and send money back successfully is for the future to tell. During the hot summer of 2004, the migrant group became inactive. Elías left office in December 2004, and Reveriano Orozco wonders if the San Franciscans in the Nevada club will lose their desire to continue to work to fund public projects. He certainly hopes not and has plans to steer them toward investing in another project, such as the introduction of a new agricultural crop to the region.

In contrast, no collective remittances are sent to Peribán de Ramos for the purpose of funding public projects or supporting either the church or the town's fiesta in April. Some remittances have been pooled by friends and family to begin small business ventures and to purchase land. One reason for this absence may have to do with the size and stratification of the community. Peribán de Ramos is much larger and more economically stratified than San Francisco. Although migrant networks ensure the formation of close-knit relationships in U.S. towns and cities among individuals from Peribán, there is not the same strength of community in Peribán as there is in San Francisco. The most compelling explanation for the absence of a hometown association, however, is the disconnect between the town authorities and their migrants in the north. Unlike San Francisco, where the town officials are of the same economic class as the migrants, the president of the municipio and several others from his team are owners of large avocado orchards. The organization in Las Vegas formed because of a request from the head of the town who was family and friend to many of the migrants up north. The officials in Peribán have never made such a request. Individual remittances, however, are extremely important to the livelihood of many families in the municipality of Peribán (Leco 2003).

In the much poorer village of Paráztaco, remittances of any sort are rare. Almost one third of the population's 300 residents are in the United States, where most of them live with their families and are not likely to return to Mexico. For those two hundred residents who have stayed in Paráztaco, one family receives remittances and is using the money to construct a new home. The remainder of the residents think of remittances as a safety net, a *possibility* if there is an emergency such as a family illness but not something that currently sustains them.

In the past several years, Paráztaco has made great strides in development (potable water, electricity, and roads). The town manager blames



the lack of these services for the tremendous out-migration, and she hopes that as the next generation grows, they will be more content to stay in their town. If this becomes the case, it is possible that the town will begin to see an influx of remittances to further improve the standard of living within the community. The one house that is currently being constructed with migrant dollars may serve as an example to the next generation.

### **Conclusion**

The increasing importance of migrant remittances to individual countries and the global economy over the past two decades has stimulated the academic debate over the effects of fund transfers. The first of the two opposing viewpoints argues that remittances are a negative force for micro and macro development. Studies supporting this view typically argue remittances create a dependency on foreign capital, drain countries of their most productive sectors of society, and do not promote investment since the overwhelming percentage of remittances are spent on consumption. Other studies, however, argue that remittances are a benefit to local and national economies. Proponents of remittances argue that such transfer of funds directly benefits those most in need of aid, that the multiplier effects of remittances both directly and indirectly benefits local and national economies, and that remittances are an important tool for the development of individual countries (Durand et al. 1996).

Meyers, in a 1998 study for the Inter-American Dialogue, demonstrates the contradictory nature of previous remittance research. Meyers points to research from El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico to show how specific case studies of particular countries yield evidence supporting both sides of the debate on remittances. In the specific case of Mexico, the conflicting research shows how remittances have mixed impacts on the economy. On the negative side, remittances are used primarily for consumption, causing inflated prices, income inequality, and little investment (Chami, et al. 2003). Other studies, however, show how remittances reduce poverty, increase employment, create a demand for local goods and services, and increase the probability of business formation (Cornelius 1990a; Taylor 1992; Durand, et al. 1996b). These varied results and interpretations suggest that the question regarding the impact of remittances is a complex one that goes beyond the dichotomous debate of whether they are "good" or "bad."

Migration and remittances are far too complex to characterize simply as positive or negative—or as productive or nonproductive. The human face of migration reminds us that there are thousands of stories

telling of the pain of separated husbands and wives, the fear of a mother for her child crossing the border, the pride of returning from the U.S. in a new Ford pickup, wasted years in a foreign place, the satisfaction of a parent giving a child an education, and the simple necessity of spending migrant earnings to feed several young children. Within the social and economic context of Peribán, many are making the choice to leave for the U.S. because of the lack of alternatives at home. Some migrants return frustrated and defeated, whereas others improve their standard of living by constructing a home and perhaps purchasing farm land.

Everyone in Peribán is affected by migration, most through direct experiences with family members, friends, or themselves migrating to and working in the U.S. Some of the stories they tell are funny, some tragic; many are about hard times crossing the border and working in the U.S. Although grateful to receive remittances to help pay for clothing, house repairs, and healthcare, most are also saddened by the absence of family. Many wives live without their husbands for months every year or for years in succession. Some husbands abandon their families; others come back for the holidays and eventually return permanently; still others settle in the U.S. with their families.

Although many have migrated north themselves or have family members who have, townspeople often blame migrants for various social problems in Peribán de Ramos. Town leaders speak of young men returning with souped-up cars, loud music blasting from their windows, and drugs. Several echoed what President Don Fernando Guillen (himself a former migrant before he made his money in avocados) said about returning migrants: "They come back from there [U.S.] and they bring their dollars; they don't work and they spend their money on their house or perhaps on their family. They spend it on their drugs or on their diversion and then they return north." Further elaborating on the issue of drugs, identified as one of the major issues confronting Peribán de Ramos, the President stated "It's the migrants who brought all of this . . . and I say to all my *paisanos* that are in the U.S., that I worry for your children because here we have seen the increase in drug addiction because of people that return from the United States." The owner of a small, new hotel in Peribán de Ramos, likewise complains about the loud, disrespectful return of migrants who party until their money is gone, but he estimates that they represent a visible minority. Although many were concerned about the influence of returning young men and about their own children up north, the vast majority of people we talked with recognized the necessity of people going north to find work in order to earn higher wages so they and their families can survive economically.

From the perspective of townspeople whom we interviewed, circular migration has brought changes that are viewed both positively and

negatively. For example, concerned about the creeping influences of U.S. culture, such as Halloween customs, the school and government officials in Peribán de Ramos initiated a townwide *Día de los Muertos* festival at the high school. Three days before All Souls Day, parents and students at the local school go to extravagant lengths to display customs from across Michoacán for Día de los Muertos. The evening includes dancing, music, and elaborately prepared food in different cantinas. Mock graves are erected, candles are lit, and people kneel and pray. All this effort is an attempt to preserve the ancestral traditions of Día de los Muertos and to combat the more consumerist “trick or treat” customs and costumes brought back from migrants living in the United States.

In the small town of Paráztaco, the twenty or so return migrants who gathered to share with us their experiences in the North seemed very frustrated and despondent. Many reported that they had negative encounters in the U.S. and cited cases of racism and mistreatment. Upon return to Paráztaco, life didn't change for the better. These men, who represented the few migrants who did return over the years, came back largely empty-handed. Guadalupe Sánchez, the *Encargada de Orden* of Paráztaco, indicated that although there are a few cases where people have returned and built houses, migration seems to simply drain Paráztaco of its young people. They leave to go to the United States because there is so little for them in Paráztaco, and then if they do come back, they tend to move down into Peribán de Ramos, the largest town in the municipality.

Guadalupe Sánchez wouldn't classify the migrant experiences from her town as either good or bad. She spoke with great sadness about the drain of her town's population due to migration, while recognizing some of the positives. “Some of them [migrants] are improving their houses of wood . . . and little by little they are sending material to the mother so that they can live well.” Migration serves as a potential safety net for her town's people, though it has not been utilized with frequency.

The effects of migration that officials in Peribán de Ramos cited as negative, particularly a rise in drug use, are recognized as a similar problem in San Francisco Peribán. The town mayor spoke of how a few years ago one had to make a special trip to purchase illegal substances, but that today “they make house calls.” Despite this, there is a respect for return migrants and the community tends to speak more positively and proudly about their migrants. A previous town mayor states when the migrants return, the townspeople “respect them and they treat them well.” We witnessed this firsthand. It may well have to do with the fact that San Francisco Peribán is a much smaller community where there are no strangers. However, the fact that some migrants, albeit a small percentage, are participating in funding town projects through migrant organizations re-

minds both the townspeople and the migrants that they are not forgotten. The impact of these HTAs, and their historic and recent activities—donating the town clock, providing yearly funds for the town fiesta, and now contributing to the bullring—should not be underestimated.

Mexican migrants continue to forge new paths in and across the U.S. and Mexico. In the process, individuals, families, and communities are being transformed. While some families are fragmented, even destroyed by the crossings, others are stretched and some strengthened. In some cases, people leave and are never heard from again; others stay in close communication, especially now with affordable telephone and e-mail; still others provide a constant source of economic support. From the perspective of many people with whom we spoke, the wages earned in the U.S. are a critical source of support. Such wages enable families to raise children and build houses. We argue that from this perspective, paying for food, healthcare, and the construction of houses, including putting in windows or cement floors, increases the quality of life and the standard of living—and thus is both rational and productive.

It is important for researchers to examine the macro, meso, and micro effects of migration and remittances, but it is hardly reasonable to hold individuals who are living at subsistence-level responsible for not investing in what economists may consider to be productive ends when they are trying, first and foremost, to feed, clothe, and house their families. We need macro (structural), meso (institutional), and micro (individual) approaches to these questions both to understand the complex system of economic exchange and also to appreciate people's priorities, motivations, and actions. In order to humanize the process, we need to keep in mind the human face of migration *and* see beyond the individual to the global, national, and transnational forces that shape people's livelihoods, practices, and possibilities.

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