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S56.05**Social vulnerability and geopolitical conflicts due to socio-environmental migration in Mexico**Ursula Oswald Spring*National University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico City, Mexico*

Objectives: This article explores the complexity of international migration and its repercussions for Mexico and USA. Latinos are the first minority in the USA, half are illegal immigrants, the majority are Mexicans. They are exposed to all kinds of threats. The fence between both countries, the technological training of the US Border Patrol, drones, etc. have forced migrants to cross in dangerous regions (desert of Arizona) or to ally with transnational organized crime (drug, arms, human, organ traffickers; Klot & DeLargy 2007) that have made this border a most violent region, with impacts for both countries due to prostitution, public insecurity, crime, HIV-AIDS, money laundering and drugs. This insecurity forced both countries to collectively combat this social cancer in the framework of the Merida agreement (Kochhar 2007). **Methods:** Demographic studies, deep interviews, participative observation, life histories, police data, political and intelligence cooperation between USA and Mexico, newspaper reports and focus groups are the tools for analyzing migration, the coping mechanisms developed to mitigate the threats and destruction of social networks and social vulnerability, and the emerging violence among competing crime gangs that has created a loss of governance along the Mexican border (in 7 months in 2008, 300 executions occurred only in Juárez and more than 2,000 in Mexico).

Results: Migration from Mexico to the USA is due to socioeconomic differences, environmental threats and public insecurity. Since 1986, the legal status of Latin migrants in the USA has changed and now most cross illegally. Mexican migrants have increased since NAFTA (1994). Despite the fence, electronic observation systems including drones, annually 450,000 to 500,000 Mexicans immigrate. Legal and physical obstacles have created new conflicts and the rejection of an immigration law in 2007 by US Congress increased the vulnerability of Latin migrants. Often migration is linked to organized crime. This is a result of the neoliberal model with low growth rates (below 2%), a corrupt privatization process with a high concentration of wealth, an inefficient education system, low investments in infrastructure, and a lacking policy to create jobs that pushed trained young people into illegal activities (500,000 are linked to drug gangs; AFI 2008; Mexican Congress 2008). Also the demand for a cheap labor, drugs and pornography in the USA are drivers for illegal migration. The impacts of climatic change already affect Mexico, where 82% of the land is semiarid, arid and hyperarid. Drought, changes in precipitation, floods in coastal areas, plagues and crop illnesses, together with salinization of soil and aquifers resulted in declining crop yields what led to unsustainable livelihoods. This process affected primarily peasants depending on rain-fed subsistence crops representing almost 78% of all rural producers. Their productive activities cannot guarantee the reproduction of their very poor livelihoods. Since NAFTA (1994) the annual import of corn increased from 0.47 to 11 million tons, the price dropped until 2004 by -64% due to US subsidies, while the tortilla price increased by +279% (SAGARPA 2008). A combination of climatic and socio-economic factors (rising costs of agricultural inputs, declining prices for food crops, price hikes of the basic food basket) and political neglect (uncontrolled import of subsidized maize without customs, lack of governmental support for rural production) resulted in a survival dilemma (Brauch 2008; Oswald 1991, 2008) for poor families in rural areas forcing them to migrate to urban centers, to USA or to plant illegal crops. Since the 1970s, urban slums experience a persistent socioeconomic crisis, failure of economic, education and social policies. Lacking jobs draw young people into drug trafficking (Oswald 2006; Schteingart 2006). This increased illegal migration to USA. It is impossible to speak only of environmental or socio-economic migration. 'Forced' migration is a complex, multi-causal and interactive phenomenon with often negative outcomes that can destroy family and community life and increase the social vulnerability of women, who must work in the fields, care for children and maintain the extended family. If these developments are linked to public insecurity and organized crime entire villages must flee from physical violence. The change of US immigration laws and the growing prosecution have created new conflicts with Mexico. The rejection of the legalization of migration in 2007 has increased the social vulnerability of illegal migrants. Mounting obstacles for crossing the border shifted migration increasingly to more dangerous regions what has resulted in a high human death toll due to dehydration, venomous snakes and extreme temperatures in the desert. The prosecution and forced repatriation of adults has left for every five deported people one child behind what has severely weakened family bonds (Pew Hispanic Center 2008). Often these children are born in the USA and are US citizens, but their parents and families do not ask for them, fearing that they would also be

deported. A similar situation is created by US policies to “repatriates” migrants separately, for instance children through Juárez and parents through Tijuana, despite the binding protocol for child protection. This destroyed family bonds (Cremades 2008), threatened the physical and psychological survival, exposed children and women to rape, human and drug trafficking and forced prostitution (WTO 2004).

Conclusions: Environmental and social problems increased the complexity of international migration and illegal immigration in the USA. Environmental (Myers 2002, 2008; IOM 2003, 2007, 2008; Castles 2002; Black 2001) or socioeconomic migration (Chávez 2008) are linked and ‘forced’ migration is a complex, multi-causal and interactive process, often with nonlinear outcomes that can destroy family and community life and increase social vulnerability of women. They are left behind to deal alone with fieldwork, care for children and the extended family. Insecure land and water rights have also generated complex emergencies within communities. Due to public insecurity and organized crime entire villages are fleeing from physical violence.

The declining social cohesion, disintegration of networks related to migration, the loss of livelihoods, the illegal crossing controlled by transnational crime gangs have resulted in a low intensity war. The improved surveillance of the US border patrols has forced migrants to rely on organized crime. This has not only increased the vulnerability of people and corruption on both sides, but this has created geopolitical conflicts in the USA and Mexico. This war against organized crime has forced both governments to exchange intelligence and coordinate policy against these gangs. But cooperation on development activities to improve livelihoods and environmental services in remote rural areas), including the creation of jobs for young people and a strong social and environmental policy in Mexico would better counter rising criminal behavior (Tickner 2008; UNODC 2003, 2005) and open a potential for a peaceful living together of both countries.

Sources in:

- Brauch/Oswald/Mesjasz/Grin/Dunay/Behera/Chourou/Kameri-Mbote/Liotta (Eds): Globalization and Environmental Challenges: Reconceptualizing Security in the 21st Century (Berlin: Springer);
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