



Migration from Huehuetenango in Guatemala's Western Highlands

Policy and Development Responses

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USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



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Executive Summary

Since the early 2010s, unauthorized migration from Guatemala to the United States has risen dramatically. Much of today's migration comes from the Western Highlands, a region that is among the poorest and most rural in the country. No place in the Western Highlands has seen more out-migration than Huehuetenango, a department of roughly 1.4 million people that is also one of the country's most ethnically diverse, with a wide range of languages spoken.

In Huehuetenango, as in much of the Western Highlands, money sent by migrants abroad has become a key resource for advancement, helping families and communities more broadly improve their housing, clothing, nutrition, education, and more. Since the onset of the pandemic, remittances have increased—from USD 10.5 billion in 2019 to USD 11.3 billion in 2020 and 15.3 billion in 2021—providing critical support to recipients as the rest of the economy contracted. In fact, the scale of remittances to Guatemala in 2020 almost equaled all of the country's exports and far exceeded government revenue, and by 2021 had almost certainly surpassed both.

While unauthorized migration has become a lifeline and an increasingly common pathway to opportunity for many families in Guatemala's Western Highlands, it also exposes migrants to significant risks and divides families. A central finding of this study is that people in Huehuetenango have a deep sense of rootedness—*arraigo*—in their local communities. This is particularly true in Indigenous communities that have maintained a strong sense of unique identity and long-standing processes of collective decision-making, though it is true to some degree across all of the communities studied, not all of which are majority Indigenous. Existing community structures and this strong sense of belonging represents important social assets that can be leveraged in efforts to create local alternatives to emigration.

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A critical first step toward developing alternatives to unauthorized migration—both within Guatemala and through opportunities to migrate via legal channels—is to understand the factors that drive people to leave their homes, including the underlying causes and the more specific, immediate triggers. This study, the result of a collaboration between the Migration Policy Institute and the Guatemalan nongovernmental organization Asociación Pop No'j, seeks to support this understanding through a close look at the patterns and drivers of emigration from Huehuetenango, as well as potential strategies to address push factors and create alternatives to irregular migration. It draws in part on more than 50 interviews conducted in Spring and Summer 2021 with local and national stakeholders, including community leaders, service providers, local and national government officials, and leading scholars.

The research finds that migration from Huehuetenango is overwhelmingly driven by poverty and that it has become an important strategy for families to improve their livelihoods. Violence, corruption, inadequate access to basic services and nutrition, and discrimination also play a role in spurring migration, though the

limited data to date make it difficult to gauge the relative degree to which these act as specific triggers for migration and how they may interact with other factors. Not all municipalities have the same intensity of emigration, and there are many whose migration patterns are still mostly focused on other destinations within Guatemala and in southern Mexico. However, once migration to the United States starts in earnest, it quickly becomes a strategy available to a wide range of families. In fact, there is some evidence that those with the least income are among those most likely to migrate. This runs somewhat counter to the established literature on migration and development, which has tended to show that the poorest migrate less than those with some degree of resources. In the case of Huehuetenango, however, as robust social networks have developed abroad, these networks have made it possible for even the poorest families to conceive of an international migration journey.

Migration from Huehuetenango and the Western Highlands more broadly is likely to continue for some time. For many families, it is the most promising way to get ahead in life and a strategy that has become increasingly common in many communities. Yet, there are a number of approaches that, over time, could help manage migration better and provide local alternatives to emigration, including:

- ▶ **Building out legal migration pathways as alternatives to irregular movement.** No combination of development interventions or immigration enforcement is likely to reduce unauthorized migration significantly in the short term, so providing legal migration options would help ensure that more of this movement happens in a safe, orderly, and regular manner. Policymakers in the region should actively explore ways to expand legal migration pathways that allow people to move with greater circularity between Guatemala and other countries—especially the United States, but also Canada and Mexico. Doing so would enable them to earn money abroad but remain rooted in their communities in Guatemala, while also addressing key labor market needs in destination countries. This may be the single most important issue to address in the short term when it comes to managing irregular migration from Guatemala.
- ▶ **Developing the social and economic infrastructure of local communities.** The strong sense of belonging common to many communities in the Western Highlands means that most people would rather not migrate if other alternatives were available. Development interventions can play an important role in building long-term alternatives to migration while also addressing specific conditions that drive people to migrate. Some of these are essential long-term strategies, such as improving access to education and health care, while others can help address specific migration triggers, such as providing access to low-cost credit or services that address domestic violence.
- ▶ **Investing in local actors as agents of change.** Engaging local leadership and community-level organizations, as well as migrants abroad who remain connected to their home communities and returning migrants, makes eminent practical sense in developing strategies to address migration pressures. These forms of leadership that are already well established in local communities can be instrumental in tailoring interventions to the local context. Development interventions will need to balance the desire to achieve large-scale change through major investments across multiple communities with an approach that builds capacity, accountability, and solutions from the grassroots.

Understanding the reasons people migrate is critical both to finding ways of creating safe, orderly, and regular pathways for mobility and to reducing pressures to migrate in the future by creating greater opportunities beyond migration. While there is no single strategy to make this happen, approaches that build on existing social capital, leadership, and networks make these efforts more productive and more likely to succeed.

BOX 1

A New Approach to Regional Migration

This publication is part of a series that focuses on the region from Canada to Panama, looking at the changing landscape of migration trends and policies. The series aims to develop actionable ideas, suggest implementation strategies, convene stakeholders inside and outside of government, and foster dialogue across issues, sectors, and countries on shared regional priorities. This work presents a new approach to managing regional migration that is centered around four specific pillars: effective humanitarian protection systems, targeted legal pathways, professionalized migration management, and informed investments in development and governance in countries of origin, transit, and reception. Such strategies should build on existing capacities of governmental and nongovernmental actors, as well as harmonized efforts across stakeholders.

To learn more about this series, see bit.ly/MPI-RegionalMig.

1 Introduction

Migration is not new to Huehuetenango or to the other departments that make up Guatemala's Western Highlands, but it has accelerated noticeably in recent years and become much more focused on the United States. There were an estimated 1.3 million Guatemalan immigrants living in the United States in 2020, up 44 percent from 902,000 in 2013.¹ Since the early 2010s, the number of unauthorized migrants and asylum seekers from Guatemala encountered at the U.S. southwest border has increased gradually, reaching 283,000 encounters in 2021.² Surveys suggest that Huehuetenango, a department of roughly 1.4 million people,³ is one of two in Guatemala, out of 22, that

Huehuetenango, a department of roughly 1.4 million people, is one of two in Guatemala, out of 22, that lead the country in emigration to the United States.

- 1 See Table 4 in Andrew Selee et al., *Laying the Foundation for Regional Cooperation: Migration Policy and Institutional Capacity in Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021), 23. The 2013 figure is drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, while the 2020 estimate was calculated by the report's authors based on data from multiple U.S. government sources and using a set of assumptions described in that report to produce more recent estimates than were available from the Census Bureau.
- 2 There were 113,000 apprehensions of Guatemalan nationals at the border in U.S. fiscal year (FY) 2018, and more than double that—270,000—in FY 2019. This figure dropped to 48,000 in FY 2020 as pandemic-related border closures were introduced, but it rose again to 283,000 in FY 2021. However, note that the figures may count some individuals multiple times, since recidivism rates—the number of people who are encountered more than once—increased noticeably in FY 2021. See U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "Southwest Land Border Encounters," accessed September 15, 2021. On the difficulties of comparing numbers across years, because of the recidivism rate, see Jessica Bolter, "It's Too Simple to Call 2021 a Record Year for Migration at the U.S.-Mexico Border" (commentary, Migration Policy Institute, October 2021).
- 3 Guatemalan National Institute of Statistics (INE), "Guatemala: Estimaciones de la Población total por municipio. Período 2008-2020," accessed September 15, 2021.

lead the country in emigration to the United States, and it is second only to Guatemala City in receiving remittances.⁴

FIGURE 1

Huehuetenango and Guatemala's Western Highlands



Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) compilation.

This report looks at what drives irregular migration from Huehuetenango and how policymakers and development practitioners can help create other options for people to improve their livelihoods and address other drivers of migration. The two sections that follow provide an overview of changing migration patterns from Huehuetenango and then examine in greater depth the reasons people migrate. The fourth section outlines strategies for creating alternatives to irregular migration, by developing both legal migration pathways and local interventions that may, over time, encourage more people to stay. While national-level issues of rule of law and governance are central to long-term development outcomes in

⁴ Based on detailed return data compiled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and analyzed by Migration Policy Institute (MPI) researchers. For reporting on several remittance studies, by department, see Geldi Muñoz, "Guatemala el departamento que recibe el mayor flujo de remesas," *El Periódico*, August 16, 2019.

Guatemala,⁵ this report focuses specifically on local conditions and interventions in Huehuetenango that may provide an important complement to broad-based structural changes.

This study is the result of a collaboration between the Guatemalan nongovernmental organization Asociación Pop No'j, which has a long history of working in Huehuetenango, and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), a global research organization. The study is based on a review of the existing literature on migration and development in Huehuetenango and the Western Highlands; field research conducted in May and June 2021 in four municipalities of Huehuetenango—Jacaltenango, San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, San Pedro Necta, and Unión Cantinil—that involved 28 interviews with community leaders, local authorities, and service providers; 28 additional interviews conducted with experts at the national level between May and August 2021; and a final research trip to seven of Huehuetenango's municipalities by the three authors in June 2021. (See the Appendix for additional details.)

While this study cannot answer all of the questions raised by emigration from Huehuetenango and the Western Highlands of Guatemala, much less provide a definitive set of alternatives, it offers initial findings that may be useful to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers in Guatemala and abroad.

2 Patterns of Migration

While migration is not new in Huehuetenango or the Western Highlands, it has changed considerably in recent years. Historically, Guatemalans from the Western Highlands have migrated in large numbers to the coffee plantations in the country's mountainous region near the Pacific Ocean as well as to those in southern Mexico.⁶ Others have migrated to major cities, including Guatemala City, usually to pursue better work opportunities for periods of time. In the past, many others migrated to forested areas in Petén, Ixcán, and even internationally to Belize to open up new agricultural land, although there are few options to do this today as there is limited land left to be claimed.

In the 1960s, some communities in the Western Highlands, including parts of Huehuetenango, developed patterns of migration to the United States. These accelerated noticeably in the early 1980s, when the Western Highlands became engulfed in the country's internal armed conflict, including several massacres in Huehuetenango and neighboring departments.⁷ The area known as “the Huistas” around the municipality of Jacaltenango, in particular, developed an active migration corridor to southern Florida (centered around

5 Jonathan Menkos Zeissig and Carlos Alvarado Mendoza, *Migración Forzada en Guatemala: Algunas reflexiones económicas y fiscales* (Guatemala City: Central American Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021); Jeff Ernst et al., *U.S. Foreign Aid to the Northern Triangle, 2014-2019: Promoting Success by Learning from the Past* (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2020).

6 Many scholars have argued that the government and major plantation owners deliberately forced Indigenous communities into smaller and more remote parts of the Western and Central Highlands so they would remain dependent on migration to the coffee plantations for survival. For a good overview of land patterns and migration in Guatemalan history, see Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., *A Short History of Guatemala* (Guatemala: Editorial Laura Lee, 2008). For specific discussions of the Western Highlands, see Manuela Camus, *La Sorpresita del Norte: Migración internacional y comunidad en Huehuetenango* (Guatemala City: Centro de Documentación de la Frontera Occidental de Guatemala, 2008); Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj, “Pueblos indígenas, estado y lucha por tierra en Guatemala: Estrategias de sobrevivencia y negociación ante la desigualdad globalizada” (PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2005).

7 On historical migration patterns from Huehuetenango, see Camus, *La Sorpresita del Norte*.

the town of Jupiter), just north of Miami,⁸ while the Q'anjob'al region developed migration patterns to Los Angeles, California, and to Omaha, Nebraska, among other places.⁹ Many other people fled to refugee camps in Mexico and later made their way to the United States from there.¹⁰

One of the first studies of migration in Huehuetenango notes that by 2004, between one-quarter and one-third of all families in Huehuetenango had a relative living in the United States. The era of large-scale migration had not yet started, but the networks were well established.¹¹

Today, many, but by no means all, municipalities in Huehuetenango have developed robust social networks that link them to migrants from their communities who are in the United States. There are large communities of Guatemalans throughout California, Florida, Texas, and Nebraska, as well as in the metropolitan areas of New York City and Washington, DC.¹² In a 2020 study by the Catholic Diocese of Huehuetenango, more than 80 percent of people surveyed in the department said that they had close family members living in the United States, with most in California and Florida.¹³

There is considerable variation in migration patterns across Huehuetenango and the Western Highlands in general, and some municipalities still have more migration to other parts of Guatemala and southern Mexico than to the United States. Yet, once networks to the United States develop, they tend to facilitate future migration, as has been the case with migration corridors around the world. This is often referred to as “cumulative causation,”¹⁴ since past migration facilitates future migration. This is both because personal connections facilitate migrants’ arrival, housing, and employment in a new environment, and because remittances gradually become a way of life for local communities in Guatemala; those with relatives abroad have access to opportunities—from housing and



- 8 Silvia Irene Palma, Carol Girón Solórzono, and Timothy Steigenga, “From Jacaltenango to Jupiter: Negotiating the Concept of ‘Family’ through Transnational Space and Time,” in *A Place to Be: Brazilian, Guatemalan, and Mexican Immigrants in Florida’s New Destinations*, eds. Philip J. Williams, Timothy J. Steigenga, and Manuel A. Vasquez (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Juan José López, *Migración transnacional entre Jacaltenango, Huehuetenango y Jupiter, Florida* (Guatemala City: Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales, 2019).
- 9 Aracely Martínez Rodas, “Las organizaciones guatemaltecas como actores transnacionales: resultados de la encuesta a migrantes en Estados Unidos,” in *Migraciones en América Central Políticas, territorios y actores*, ed. Carlos Sandoval García (San José, Costa Rica: Universidad de Costa Rica, 2016).
- 10 Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes: A Guatemalan Journey of Courage, Terror, and Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Victor Montejo, *Voices from Exile: Death and Survival in Modern Guatemala* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Susanne Jonas and Nestor Rodríguez, *Guatemala-US Migration* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).
- 11 Camus, *La Sorpresita del Norte*, 39.
- 12 A breakdown of the United States’ Guatemalan immigrant population by state and metropolitan region can be found on the MPI Data Hub, “[Immigrant Population by State and County](#),” accessed September 3, 2021. A few key sources to understand migration patterns are: Jonas and Rodríguez, *Guatemala-US Migration*; Eric Popkin, “The Emergence of Pan-Mayan Ethnicity in the Guatemalan Transnational Community Linking Santa Eulalia and Los Angeles,” *Current Sociology* 53, no. 4 (2005): 675–706; Martínez Rodas, “Las organizaciones guatemaltecas.”
- 13 Felipe Banegas, *Informe sobre migración en Huehuetenango* (Huehuetenango, Guatemala: Diocese of Huehuetenango, 2020).
- 14 Douglas S. Massey, “Social Structure, Household Strategies, and the Cumulative Causation of Migration,” *Population Index* 56, no. 1 (1990): 3–26.

transportation to health care, education, and better nutrition—that others cannot afford.¹⁵ Since the onset of the pandemic, remittances have increased, from USD 10.5 billion in 2019 to USD 11.3 billion in 2020 and jumping to 15.3 billion in 2021, acting as a critical lifeline as the rest of the country's economy contracted.¹⁶

Remittances are also crucial to the initial journey itself. Migrating to the United States costs money, and most Guatemalans appear to use *coyotes*, human smugglers, in their journey north.¹⁷ Over time, the business of smuggling has become professionalized, and the fees usually charged for the journey have doubled from an average of USD 5,200–7,800 in 2016 to USD 10,400–15,600 in 2019.¹⁸ Furthermore, a 2019 study by the Rand Corporation notes that the modalities of smuggling have become far more varied, with some smugglers who conduct the entire journey to the United States and others who pass clients off to Mexican smugglers once they cross into that country.¹⁹

According to interviews conducted for the present study, migrants pay 25 percent to 50 percent of travel costs up front, often with their land title as a guarantee against default, and then pay the remaining balance once they reach the United States.²⁰ In some instances, if the smuggler knows the migrant's family, monthly payment plans can be arranged. In most cases, relatives in the United States help pay the initial fee, although there are cases where people borrow the money from a local loan shark or sometimes directly from the smuggler, who will generally charge 10 percent to 20 percent interest per month.²¹ This can create greater vulnerabilities for migrants and their families, particularly if the migration attempt is unsuccessful and they fail to access the higher wages offered in the United States.²²

This means that migration to the United States is not open to everyone, though it has become far more accessible than it was before. As a result, some people continue to migrate to Mexico and Belize as less expensive and less risky alternatives. One study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) suggests that more than one-quarter (29 percent) of those migrating are actually headed to Mexico rather than the United States.²³ Today, many Guatemalans who migrate to Mexico go to Cancún, Playa del Carmen, and other tourist destinations in the state of Quintana Roo, rather than to the *fincas* (large plantations) in Chiapas. In many cases, this is seen as the next best option for those who lack the resources to pay a

15 Andrew Selee and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, *Building a New Regional Migration System: Redefining U.S. Cooperation with Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2020).

16 Bank of Guatemala, "Remesas familiares," accessed January 24, 2022; Menkos Zeissig and Alvarado Mendoza, *Migración Forzada en Guatemala*.

17 A 2021 survey by the UN World Food Program (WFP) found that 78 percent of Guatemalans reported that family members who had migrated used a smuggler to make the journey, compared to 64 percent of Salvadorans and 25 percent of Hondurans. See Ariel G. Ruiz Soto et al., *Charting a New Regional Course of Action: The Complex Motivations and Costs of Central American Migration* (Rome, Washington, DC, and Cambridge, MA: WFP, MPI, and Civic Data Design Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2021).

18 Úrsula Roldán, *Informe de Investigación: Dinámicas migratorias y desplazamiento forzado en Guatemala* (San José, Costa Rica: CONARE-PEN, 2020).

19 Victoria A. Greenfield et al., *Human Smuggling and Associated Revenues: What Do or Can We Know about Routes from Central America to the United States?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019).

20 Based on the interviews conducted with community leaders, service providers, and public authorities in the four studied municipalities in Huehuetenango, and the supplementary interviews conducted by the authors in seven municipalities of Huehuetenango (see the Appendix).

21 Roldán, *Informe de Investigación*.

22 Richard L. Johnson and Murphy Woodhouse, "Securing the Return: How Enhanced US Border Enforcement Fuels Cycles of Debt Migration," *Antipode* 50, no. 4 (February 18, 2018).

23 International Labor Organization (ILO) and IOM, *Migración Laboral: un estudio de casos de la juventud guatemalteca en México* (Guatemala: ILO and IOM, 2019).

smuggler and migrate to the United States, and it may sometimes be a way to earn the money for a longer journey in the future.²⁴ In addition, there is some seasonal migration to Belize for work. The 2020 diocesan study reports that slightly less than 4 percent of people in Huehuetenango had a family member living long term in Mexico and about 2 percent had one in Belize.²⁵

Available evidence suggests that most Guatemalans see migration as a temporary strategy to improve their quality of life and that of their families.²⁶ In most cases, migration is a household decision as much as an individual one, a way for families to cover basic necessities, save money for specific investment purposes, or acquire land.²⁷ In a few cases, international migration is also a response to threats of violence, sometimes intrafamily but other times from organized crime or political actors.²⁸ However, overall Guatemalans are less likely to cite violence as a factor and more likely to plan to return home someday than migrants from Honduras and El Salvador.²⁹

Available evidence suggests that most Guatemalans see migration as a temporary strategy to improve their quality of life and that of their families.

Some of the increase in migration from Huehuetenango is probably a response to long-term increases in income and access to the cash economy, even if these remain far below the national average. Multiple studies have shown that countries tend to experience increased out-migration as their GDP increases,³⁰ and that this continues until they reach a higher level of development.³¹ This is largely because people tend to develop greater aspirations to migrate and have greater capability to do so as they have more income,³² while the value of staying where they are still provides few opportunities for advancement.³³ This process continues until the opportunities accrued by staying outweigh those that can be attained by leaving. In the case of Huehuetenango, of course, even residents at the lowest income levels have sometimes been able to access the resources to migrate due to assistance from family members abroad.

24 Based on interviews with community leaders, service providers, and public authorities in four municipalities of Huehuetenango (see the Appendix). There were a number of cases of migration to Quintana Roo in the Catholic Diocese study; see Banegas, *Informe sobre migración en Huehuetenango*.

25 Banegas, *Informe sobre migración en Huehuetenango*.

26 Anita Isaacs and Jorge Morales Toj, "Guatemala Is America's Best Chance to Fix the Immigration Problem," *New York Times*, June 7, 2021.

27 Based on the interviews conducted for this study (see the Appendix). See also the research by Guatemalan scholars Úrsula Roldán and Elizabeth Gramajo Bauer, who note that the timeline most people used to report for their planned migration journey was three to five years, but it has grown to five to eight years. See Roldán, *Informe de Investigación*.

28 See the next section on this point. Guatemalans report violence far less frequently as a reason for migration than do Salvadorans and Hondurans, but there are significant exceptions.

29 Creative Associates International, *Saliendo Adelante: Why Migrants Risk It All* (Washington, DC: Creative Associates International, 2019).

30 GDP per capita in Guatemala was USD 2,852 in 2010, 3,994 in 2015, and 4,603 in 2020. While USD 4,000 GDP per capita is not a real threshold but a global average, it is still instructive that Guatemala crossed this line in the past five to ten years. See World Bank, "GDP per Capita (Current US\$)—Guatemala," accessed September 3, 2021.

31 For recent studies that look at how development may spur migration, at least until countries reach a certain level of development, see Michael Clemens, *The Emigration Life Cycle: How Development Shapes Emigration from Poor Countries* (Washington, DC: Center for Global Development, 2020); Hein de Haas, "Migration Transitions: A Theoretical and Empirical Inquiry into the Developmental Drivers of International Migration" (working paper, Oxford University, International Migration Institute, Oxford, May 2010); Loren B. Landau, Caroline Wanjiku Kihato, and Helen Postel, "How Europe Is Making its Migration Problem Worse: The Dangers of Aiding Autocrats," *Foreign Affairs*, September 5, 2018.

32 Hein de Haas, "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework," *Comparative Migration Studies* 9, no. 8 (February 2021).

33 Clemens, *The Emigration Life Cycle*; de Haas, "Migration Transitions."

At the same time, as people achieve higher incomes, they also tend to have fewer children, which reduces pressure on the domestic workforce and relieves some pressures for migration.³⁴ This has already happened, to some extent, in Mexico and El Salvador and may eventually happen in Guatemala (and Honduras), but there is nothing predetermined about these outcomes. Indeed, these scenarios depend significantly on the potential for increased and equitable growth over time.

In the case of Guatemala, the presence of the United States' fairly robust labor market only a thousand or so miles away provides a logical alternative to the limited in-country options. As the U.S. economy began to heat up again in 2021, while many Guatemalan communities continued to struggle with the pandemic's economic fallout, this provided an added incentive to move to the United States, as did policies that allowed unaccompanied minors and many families who arrived at the border to be admitted to the United States.³⁵

As a result of these factors, migration from Huehuetenango, and from much of the Western Highlands, is likely to continue for many years to come. The lack of opportunities to get ahead in the communities where people live, the powerful attraction of remittances, and the existence of strong social networks that facilitate migration will continue to exert a powerful influence on migrate desires and decisions. As will be discussed below, other factors such as violence, discrimination, and climate shifts also exert a noticeable effect that compounds the economic drivers of migration.

U.S. and Guatemalan policymakers, recognizing the durable nature of these migration pressures, should focus on building pathways for people to move legally. Under existing U.S. law, there are possibilities for seasonal work and for family reunification that can be enhanced and expanded. There are also opportunities to expand legal pathways to Canada, Mexico, and Spain, among other destinations, that together would create a series of options that currently do not exist for legal migration. Since migration is almost certain to continue, ensuring that it can occur in a way that is safe, orderly, and regular should be a priority.³⁶

3 Reasons for Migration

The existing research, and interviews conducted for this study, find that the overwhelming majority of people who migrate from Guatemala do so primarily as a way of escaping from poverty and seeking some degree of economic opportunity for their families. This contrasts with El Salvador and Honduras, where people are more likely to indicate violence as a major motivator for migrating.³⁷ For example, in a 2020 study

34 On this point, see also Michael Clemens, "The Real Root Causes of America's Border Crisis: And How Biden Can Address Them," *Foreign Affairs*, June 7, 2021.

35 The U.S. economy grew by 6.3 and 6.6 percent in the first two quarters of 2021. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis, "Gross Domestic Product (Second Estimate)" (news release, August 26, 2021). Despite the existence of Title 42, a policy that allowed for summary expulsions of migrants by U.S. authorities to Mexico, in reality all unaccompanied minors (except those from Mexico and Canada) were admitted to the United States after a policy shift on February 2, 2021. CBP statistics indicate that many Guatemalan families were also exempted from Title 42 starting in February 2021, including 37 percent in February, 42 percent in March, 44 percent in April, 63 percent in May, 77 percent in June, and 82 percent in July. CBP, "Southwest Land Border Encounters." However, as of July 2021, the U.S. government began expelling migrants to Mexico who were then taken directly by Mexican authorities to Guatemala, indicating an abrupt shift in the direction of U.S. border policy.

36 See also Clemens, "The Real Root Causes of America's Border Crisis."

37 A recent study found that 71 percent of Guatemalans who intend to migrate would do so for economic reasons, compared to 67 percent of Hondurans and 50 percent of Salvadorans. See Creative Associates International, *Saliendo Adelante*.

of migrants returned to Guatemala, 80 percent of the migrants involved indicated economic motives for moving, 10 percent described motives related to violence, and 7 percent family reunification.³⁸

In the case of Huehuetenango, once migration patterns have been established, the presence of strong family and community networks abroad makes it possible for even the poorest families to conceive of a migration journey and to pay for it.

Research for this study in Huehuetenango suggests that some particularly poor municipalities, such as San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, are less likely to have developed robust migration patterns to the United States, although they may have active migration to Mexico or to plantations in Guatemala. Meanwhile, some municipalities with long histories of migration to the United States may have seen their residents' propensity to migrate level off already.³⁹ However, some of the poorest municipalities do have robust, established

migration patterns; access to migration, thus, appears to be less a question of income than of having the social networks to facilitate migration, although this question deserves more study.⁴⁰

Indeed, among municipalities that have robust migration to the United States, those residents with the least resources appear to be the most likely to migrate. This is somewhat contrary to the literature on migration and development, which has tended to show that the poorest migrate less than those with some degree of resources, largely because of the cost of the journey and the ability to conceive of different aspirations once certain income levels are met.⁴¹ However, there is a growing acknowledgment that migration follows heterogenous patterns depending on specific circumstances.⁴² In the case of Huehuetenango, once migration patterns have been established, the presence of strong family and community networks abroad

38 Christopher Inkpen and Wayne Pitts, *Longitudinal Study of Deportees in Guatemala* (Research Triangle, NC: RTI International, 2020). Another study found that more than 80 percent of return migrants cited economic reasons for having migrated. See IOM, *Encuesta de medios de vida a población migrante retornada en Guatemala en el marco del COVID-19* (Guatemala City: IOM DTM, 2020).

39 The municipality of San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, which was part of this study and is one of the poorest municipalities in Huehuetenango, still has more internal than international migration. In contrast, Jacaltenango, which is comparatively better off (though still poor), has a long history of migration to the United States and appears to have relatively stable migration. In Unión Cantinil and San Pedro Necta, which are slightly better off than San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán and slightly poorer than Jacaltenango, migration to the United States has become particularly robust in recent years, despite little migration history before that. This information is based on interviews with community leaders, service providers, and public authorities in Huehuetenango and a review of CBP apprehensions data for families from different municipalities in Huehuetenango for fiscal years 2014–18 that were obtained via a *Freedom of Information Act* request by the University of Texas Strauss Center and shared with MPI. Caitlyn Yates, a research consultant with MPI, conducted the analysis of CBP apprehension statistics. Poverty rates were drawn from Walter Figueroa, Mark Peñate, and Paolo Marsicovetere, "Estimación de pobreza a nivel municipal en Guatemala mediante la utilización de machine learning" (unpublished manuscript, August 2020); this paper has updated Guatemalan statistics on poverty that are not available elsewhere.

40 Based on a review of IOM data on return migrants in different municipalities for calendar years 2019 and 2020, shared with MPI, and comparison against poverty rates, calculated based on Figueroa, Peñate, and Marsicovetere, "Estimación de pobreza."

41 de Haas, "A Theory of Migration."

42 Maryam Aslany, Jørgen Carling, Mathilde Bålsrud Mjelva, and Tone Sommerfelt, *Systematic Review of Determinants of Migration Aspirations* (Southampton: University of Southampton, 2021).

makes it possible for even the poorest families to conceive of a migration journey and to pay for it. These findings echo those of prior studies in Guatemala.⁴³

A 2021 study by MPI, the World Food Program, and the Civic Data Design Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found a similar relationship across Central America between vulnerability to hunger and propensity to migrate.⁴⁴ There are undoubtedly many people who are too poor to conceive of an expensive journey north, and some communities in Huehuetenango have yet to develop strong social networks in the United States. But once these networks develop, the costs and risks associated with migration drop, even for the poor.⁴⁵ For now, Huehuetenango remains a tapestry of municipalities that have greater and lesser degrees of migration to the United States, but these patterns may shift over time.

The subsections that follow look at specific drivers of migration from Huehuetenango based on the existing literature and the field research conducted for this study.

A. *Population and Poverty Pressures*

Given the importance of economic factors for migration in Huehuetenango, it is worth understanding the precarious economic situation that most residents of the department live in. Guatemala remains the most rural country in Central America and one of the youngest and poorest. Nationally, 51 percent of Guatemalans live in urban areas and 49 percent in rural areas.⁴⁶ In the Western Highlands, however, the departments are still overwhelmingly rural, including Huehuetenango, where 72 percent of the population lives in rural areas. Relatedly, one-third of all Guatemalans depend on agriculture for their primary source of income.⁴⁷

Guatemala also remains a particularly young country, with approximately 45 percent of Guatemalans under the age of 20 and 76 percent under the age of 40 as of 2018.⁴⁸ Despite this, Guatemala's annual population growth has declined significantly in the last two decades, decreasing from 2.4 percent in 2000 to 1.6 percent in 2019.⁴⁹ Even so, the country has the highest population growth rate in Central America.⁵⁰ About 200,000

43 David Kemme, *Determinants of Migration: CEO Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2019); U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), *Set Completo de Factores de Riesgo y Características que Aumentan o Disminuyen la Migración* (Guatemala City: USAID, n.d.); Alejandro I. Canales et al., *Desarrollo y migración: desafíos y oportunidades en los países del norte de Centroamérica* (Mexico City: United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019). Interestingly, migration used to be less rural; only 41 percent of migrants came from rural areas in 2001, but now 53 percent do. A 2016 IOM study of returnees confirms this trend, with 40 percent of returnees indicating that they were primarily farmers versus 30 percent of the general population. Among returnees, 40 percent indicated that they were farmers, 19 percent construction workers, 12 percent in sales, 6 percent drivers, and 7 percent general workers, while 12 percent worked in professional occupations. See IOM, *Encuesta sobre migración internacional de personas guatemaltecas y remesas 2016* (Guatemala City: IOM, 2017). A Catholic Relief Services (CRS) study similarly found that the "[s]hared characteristics among those who most wish to migrate include: unemployment, poor job quality, labor poverty, and insecurity." See CRS, *Between Rootedness and the Decision to Migrate: Push and Retention Factors of Migration in Guatemala* (Baltimore: CRS, 2020).

44 Ruiz Soto et al., *Charting a New Regional Course of Action*.

45 Massey, "Social Structure, Household Strategies, and the Cumulative Causation of Migration."

46 World Bank, "Urban Population (% of total population) – Guatemala," accessed September 15, 2021.

47 INE, *Informe ENA 2019-2020* (Guatemala City: INE, 2020).

48 INE, "XII Censo Nacional de Población y VII de Vivienda," updated 2018.

49 World Bank, "Population Growth (annual %) – Guatemala," accessed September 15, 2021.

50 Selee and Ruiz Soto, *Building a New Regional Migration System*.

young people enter the labor market each year, yet there are few new jobs for them to take.⁵¹ This situation has undoubtedly been made even worse by the pandemic and the associated economic recession. Some of these pressures will eventually be reduced as population growth slows the demand for employment growth, but this is still yet to come.

About 200,000 young people enter the labor market each year, yet there are few new jobs for them to take.

Guatemala is the fifth poorest country in Latin America and the Caribbean,⁵² with a GDP per capita of USD 4,619.⁵³ It also remains one of the world's most unequal countries, with a Gini coefficient of 48.3, and significant differences between urban and rural communities in average income, educational attainment, and health-care access.⁵⁴ As of 2014, 76 percent of rural residents were classified as living in poverty, compared with 42 percent of urban dwellers.⁵⁵ In addition, Guatemala has the highest rate of land inequality in the world, which has a particularly detrimental effect in rural communities where access to land often determines income.⁵⁶

Even though Guatemala's economy has grown, at a rate of 3 percent between 2013 and 2018,⁵⁷ more than 50 percent of the population remains in poverty.⁵⁸ One of the greatest challenges to addressing poverty in Guatemala is the lack of government revenue because of poor tax collection and, as a result, limited expenditure on basic services.⁵⁹ Public and private investments lag even compared to El Salvador and Honduras next door. The Guatemalan government raises less fiscal revenue than almost all other countries in Latin America, roughly 11 percent of GDP; the exceptions are Haiti and Venezuela.⁶⁰ This is also smaller in scale than remittances to the country, which accounted for 15 percent of GDP in 2020 (and remittances grew considerably in 2021).⁶¹

Although manufacturing has grown, especially of textiles and clothing, Guatemala remains highly dependent on primary exports, including bananas, sugar, coffee, cardamom, and oils.⁶² And while there is some important growth of technology and innovation industries in the capital,⁶³ these remain constrained and underdeveloped. A 2021 analysis by a business association suggests that the close relationship

51 Alicia Bárcena, "Diagnóstico, áreas de oportunidad y recomendaciones de la CEPAL" (presentation, National Palace, Mexico City, May 20, 2019).

52 World Bank, "Guatemala Overview," updated September 4, 2020.

53 World Bank, "GDP per Capita (current US\$) – Guatemala," accessed September 15, 2021. This puts Guatemala slightly ahead of Honduras and Nicaragua in per capita income, but vast inequalities in how that income is distributed make comparisons difficult.

54 World Bank, "Gini Index (World Bank estimate)," accessed July 4, 2021.

55 INE, *Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida 2014* (Guatemala City: INE, 2015), 4.

56 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), "Country Fact Sheet on Food and Agricultural Trends: Guatemala" (fact sheet, FAO, Rome, 2014).

57 USAID, "Guatemala: Nutrition Profile" (brief, USAID, Washington, DC, March 2018).

58 Bárcena, "Diagnóstico, áreas de oportunidad y recomendaciones de la CEPAL."

59 Menkos Zeissig and Alvarado Mendoza, *Migración Forzada en Guatemala*.

60 Menkos Zeissig and Alvarado Mendoza, *Migración Forzada en Guatemala*.

61 Bank of Guatemala, "Nota al Comercio Exterior: Año 2019," accessed November 3, 2021; Menkos Zeissig and Alvarado Mendoza, *Migración Forzada en Guatemala*.

62 Bank of Guatemala, *Guatemala en Cifras* (Guatemala City: Bank of Guatemala, 2020), 40.

63 Marcos Andrés Antil, a U.S. technology entrepreneur who originally left his Qanjob'al community in Huehuetenango as a young teenager and went on to found a global digital marketing company in the United States years later, explores this growing innovation community in Guatemala in his autobiographical book, which was a bestseller in Guatemala in 2020. See Marcos Andrés Antil, *Migrante* (self-published, 2019).

between large companies and financial institutions has played a central role in limiting credit for innovation and entrepreneurship in Guatemala. There is little competition in major sectors, no anti-trust legal framework, and few incentives and limited financial support for risk and innovation.⁶⁴ The weakness of government institutions is compounded by the underdevelopment of private financial institutions that might otherwise promote change.

In Huehuetenango, as in much of the Western Highlands, most of the population lives in rural communities and agriculture remains central to people's livelihoods. Almost three-quarters (73 percent) of the population lives in poverty, and more than one-quarter are illiterate (29 percent).⁶⁵ Given the close correlation between economic pressures and migration, it is no wonder that Huehuetenango has one of the two highest rates of emigration in the country.

B. Ethnic Stratification

Officially, 44 percent of Guatemalans identify as Indigenous. This includes 42 percent of the country's population who identify with Mayan Indigenous groups, as well as slightly less than 2 percent who identify as Xinca and Garifuna—two non-Mayan Indigenous groups located in coastal territories.⁶⁶ Another 0.2 percent of Guatemalans identify as Afro-descendant, and the remaining (narrow) majority identify as *ladino*, a uniquely Guatemalan term for people who are of European or mixed descent or who do not consider themselves Indigenous.⁶⁷ However, there is a broad perception among many researchers and policymakers that there is a significant undercount of Indigenous people in Guatemala and that a substantially larger percentage of the population may well identify as Indigenous in practice.⁶⁸

The distribution of ethnic groups is sharply defined by region. The Western and Central Highlands are home to some of the largest numbers of Indigenous peoples, while the coastal areas, the capital, and the eastern part of the country tend to be more *ladino*. In reality, the ethnic makeup of the country is even more complex. Within the Western Highlands, most Indigenous communities have at least a few *ladino* families, and there are entire municipalities that are overwhelmingly *ladino* but have some Indigenous families.

Huehuetenango is 58 percent Indigenous, and its makeup is particularly diverse.⁶⁹ The mountainous geography of the Western Highlands, especially Huehuetenango, played a major role in the development of multiple languages within a very small space, since communities often lived in relative isolation from each other.⁷⁰

64 Consejo Nacional Empresarial (CNE), *Hacia una agenda de modernización de la gobernanza económica guatemalteca* (Guatemala City: CNE, 2021).

65 INE Census 2018 Portal, "Infografías," accessed July 2021.

66 The Garifuna are an Afro-Indigenous people who live throughout Central America.

67 Agencia EFE, "Guatemala tiene 14.9 millones de habitantes y un 43.8 percent son pueblos indígenas," EFE, September 17, 2019. However, many observers believe that a majority of Guatemalans actually consider themselves Indigenous even if they do not always indicate this to census takers due to the stigma attached to doing so. On this point, see Mara Loveman, *Racial Classification and the State in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

68 This point was reflected in multiple interviews conducted for this research.

69 INE, *Caracterización República de Guatemala* (Guatemala City: INE, 2015). Mam is the dominant language in the south and southwest from the department capital towards the Mexican border, while Popti, Akateko, and Mam are spoken around Jacaltenango in the west, Q'anjob'al and Chuj in (different parts of) the north, and K'iche' in the east. And there are several other languages that have significant numbers of speakers throughout the department.

70 Camus, *La Sorpresita del Norte*.

While not all Indigenous people are poor or rural, nor are all poor people either rural or Indigenous, there tends to be a significant overlap among these categories, built out of Guatemala's specific historical patterns of ethnic stratification. Government data from 2014 show nearly eight in ten Indigenous people living in poverty, about half of whom were in extreme poverty, compared to less than half and 12 percent, respectively, of non-Indigenous people.⁷¹ Similarly, 76 percent of rural residents in Guatemala live in poverty, with 36 percent in extreme poverty, while the figures for urban residents are slightly more than 42 percent and 11 percent, respectively.⁷² Guatemala's social stratification, including land distribution, was built along ethnic lines to a degree not found elsewhere in Central America, and these patterns persist today.⁷³

Only a handful of members of the Guatemalan Congress are Indigenous, and few cabinet secretaries or senior government officials identify as such. Large business associations and even many of the most visible civil-society groups in the capital have limited Indigenous participation. And one detailed study of Guatemala's finances concludes that fiscal policy tends to reinforce rather than reverse ethnic inequalities, undermining other efforts to bridge historic ethnic stratification through social policy.⁷⁴

Guatemala's social stratification, including land distribution, was built along ethnic lines to a degree not found elsewhere in Central America.

It is hard to tell how ethnic discrimination and stratification influence migration patterns. There are no studies that comprehensively show the ethnic identity of Guatemalans who have migrated. Still, it is highly likely that these are among the wider range of factors that contribute to people's decisions to move abroad.

However, in contrast to the national level, there is considerable Indigenous representation in local government within Huehuetenango, and many communities maintain traditional forms of self-governance that involve either auxiliary mayors or councils of elders who represent the community in negotiations with political authorities, nongovernmental organizations, and business groups. Indeed, Guatemala's Indigenous communities have found a variety of ways to maintain a degree of autonomy and self-governance amid a conflicted history of abandonment and imposition from central authorities⁷⁵—something that constitutes a major asset for future development and change efforts.

Indeed, communities in Huehuetenango, and especially (though not exclusively) Indigenous communities, have deep social capital that can support the design and execution of development interventions, ensuring they are relevant to the communities they are meant to serve. A theme that emerged repeatedly in community-level interviews for this study was the sense of belonging, *arraigo*, that people have within their families and communities. Multiple interviewees pointed out that migration was usually seen as a temporary strategy to improve the family's way of life but rarely as a way of leaving forever, as it often is

71 INE, *Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida 2014*, 4 and 9.

72 INE, *Encuesta Nacional de Condiciones de Vida 2014*, 4 and 9.

73 Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj, *Pueblos Indígenas, Estado y Lucha por Tierra en Guatemala* (Guatemala City: AVANCSO, 2008).

74 Maynor Cabrera, Nora Lustig, and Hilcias Moran, "Fiscal Policy, Inequality and the Ethnic Divide in Guatemala" (Working Papers 1502, Tulane University, Department of Economics, New Orleans, 2015).

75 Carol A. Smith, "Introduction," in *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540-1988*, ed. Carol A. Smith (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990); Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*; Velázquez Nimatuj, *Pueblos Indígenas*.

in other Central American countries. While many people from Huehuetenango do end up settling abroad, especially in the United States, they seem to almost always remain deeply connected to family and community in Guatemala, and many appear to return after stays abroad.

C. *Food Security, Nutrition, and Health*

Most communities in the Western Highlands lack access to high-quality health services. In Huehuetenango, outside of the department capital, there are only three public hospitals. There was an initiative to build a major hospital in the municipality of San Pedro Necta, and while the outside structure was completed, the building was never finished and remained unused a decade after construction originally started, with construction resuming finally in Summer 2021.⁷⁶

Closely tied to the lack of medical attention is the prevalence of malnutrition, a product of both insufficient health-care access and persistent food insecurity. According to the World Food Program, Guatemala is among the five most food insecure countries in the world.

Malnutrition affects 47 percent of children nationally but around two-thirds of all children in

the Western Highlands, including 68 percent in Huehuetenango.⁷⁷ This has secondary impacts on children's school retention and learning, as well as labor productivity, vulnerability to disease, and other adverse consequences for society more broadly.⁷⁸ Rates of malnutrition are even higher in Guatemala's Indigenous communities. Eight out of ten Indigenous children nationwide suffer from chronic malnutrition, with regional and ethnic stratification reinforcing each other.⁷⁹

Malnutrition affects many Guatemalan children, including



47% nationwide
68% in Huehuetenango

There appears to be a strong link between families' experiences of hunger and the desire to migrate. According to results of a 2021 survey, analyzed in a report by MPI, the World Food Program, and the MIT Civic Data Design Lab, around one-quarter of Central American families facing hunger were planning to migrate, compared to only 7 percent of those who were food secure.⁸⁰

At the same time, remittances from relatives abroad are a proven means of improving family nutrition and access to health care, including private clinics, which are available for those who have cash income, especially in U.S. dollars. The desire to improve health outcomes—and perhaps also to manage the risk of major illness—is undoubtedly one of the important drivers behind migration decisions.

76 Based on the interviews conducted for this study (see the Appendix).

77 Presentation by Laura Melo, WFP, Guatemala City, November 2018. See also USAID, "Guatemala: Nutrition Profile."

78 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), "2017 Guatemala Humanitarian Needs Overview," updated November 2017.

79 Anna Garguiulo, "Exploring the Poverty Rate in Guatemala," The Borgen Project, August 8, 2017.

80 Ruiz Soto et al., *Charting a New Regional Course of Action*.

D. *Education and Human Capital*

Guatemala has the lowest public investment in education of any country in Central America⁸¹ and the lowest social expenditure overall as a percentage of GDP.⁸² Guatemalans over the age of 15 have completed an average of 5.3 years of schooling, compared to 8.0 years for Salvadorans and 6.7 years for Hondurans. Rural Guatemalans over age 15 have completed an even more limited 3.9 years of schooling on average.⁸³

While illiteracy in the country dropped from more than 50 percent in 1986 to 13 percent in 2015, this is still almost double the average of 7 percent in Latin American and Caribbean countries. Moreover, massive educational gaps remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents. Nearly half of Indigenous adult women and about one-quarter of Indigenous adult men cannot read or write. And while sixth graders in the capital city have consistently reached the highest standards in both reading and mathematics, these students are three times more likely to be on grade level than students of the same grade in Huehuetenango.⁸⁴ Girls have made some progress toward closing historic gaps in education, but their participation in primary education still lags slightly behind that of boys and even further behind in secondary education, especially in Indigenous communities.⁸⁵

It is hard to know if there is a direct link between the lack of educational opportunities and migration, but one relationship did emerge during the study. Almost all of the municipalities studied have private extension universities through which students can earn a college degree without having to travel to the department capital to study at the public university, which has only a limited selection of degrees. These university campuses are often, but not always, affiliated with religious groups, but they have all made a university education accessible for the first time to families who are able to pay tuition, often using remittances. This creates yet another powerful incentive to migrate: to improve the educational opportunities of the children in one's family.

E. *Employment, Markets, and Financial Access*

Agriculture plays a prominent role in many Guatemalans' livelihoods. Roughly 30 percent of Guatemalan families depend on agriculture as a major source of income or survival, with almost three-quarters (72 percent) of agricultural families living in poverty and nearly one-third (31 percent) in extreme poverty. Among families that depend on agriculture, 60 percent are Indigenous and roughly half depend solely on

81 Guatemala has one of the lowest expenditures on education in Latin America and the lowest in Central America. See World Bank, "Government Expenditure on Education, total (% of GDP) – Latin America & Caribbean (excluding high income)," accessed September 15, 2021. See also UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, Observatorio Social, "Expenditure on Education of Central Government, 2018," accessed September 15, 2021.

82 Note that average social expenditure in Latin America and the Caribbean is 11 percent of public expenditure, slightly more than in El Salvador and Honduras (each 9 percent) and in Guatemala (7 percent). See Bárcena, "Diagnóstico, áreas de oportunidad y recomendaciones de la CEPAL."

83 Manuel Orozco and Marcela Valdivia, *Educational Challenges in Guatemala and Consequences for Human Capital and Development* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2017); author compilation of data analyses from UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Hacia un nuevo estilo de desarrollo: Plan de Desarrollo Integral El Salvador-Guatemala-Honduras-México: Diagnóstico, áreas de oportunidad y recomendaciones de la CEPAL* (Mexico City: UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019).

84 Orozco and Valdivia, *Educational Challenges in Guatemala*.

85 INE, "Estadísticas de Educación, año 2019" (dataset, 2020).

agriculture, while the other half pursue other occupations in addition to agriculture to supplement their income. More than half (60 percent) of Guatemalans engaged in agriculture have only subsistence farms or less, while 9 percent are large producers, and the remaining 31 percent are small and medium producers.⁸⁶

Agriculture plays a particularly important role in the Western Highlands, including Huehuetenango. Nationwide, however, more than two-thirds of Guatemalans are employed in other sectors, mostly in service and manufacturing jobs. According to research from the Central American Institute for Fiscal Studies (ICEFI), 80 percent of Guatemalans make less than USD 380 per month, and 40 percent make less than USD 130 per month.⁸⁷ In Guatemala overall, almost two-thirds of all workers are in the informal sector,⁸⁸ and women are less than half as likely as men to be active in the labor market (31 percent vs. 69 percent).⁸⁹

The topography of Huehuetenango plays an important role in the limited penetration of formal employment. There is limited infrastructure connecting local communities to larger cities, and a journey to the national capital can easily take eight to ten hours from some localities, even if the distances are not great. The mountainous nature of the department plays a part in this, but there is also a lack of investment in basic roads to connect communities with each other and with the rest of the country.

Given the lack of other economic options, remittances have become a major means of survival and also investment for families in Guatemala. A study by the IOM indicates that almost half of remittances are spent on investments and savings, mostly home construction and renovation, with 6 percent of this amount for savings. Another one-third of remittances (35 percent) is spent on consumption, while 7 percent goes to education and health care, and 8 percent to investment in economic activities (such as starting a business).⁹⁰ In contrast, a 2017 World Food Program study found that more than half of remittances to Central America are used to buy food, followed by agricultural investments (land and animals) and investments in small businesses, and health care and education.⁹¹ In both studies, however, the conclusions were similar: A significant share of remittances are invested in homes, land, farms, and, to a much lesser extent, entrepreneurial activities.

What families do with the remittances they receive can also play a role in future migration decisions. In an extensive study of financial inclusion and advising, Manuel Orozco finds that financial advising can help remittance recipients formalize their savings and can reduce future migration.⁹² After-school education programs on savings and entrepreneurship were found to have similar impacts in a study by the U.S. Agency

86 INE, *Informe ENA 2019-2020*.

87 Menkos Zeissig and Alvarado Mendoza, *Migración Forzada en Guatemala*.

88 Orozco and Valdivia, *Educational Challenges in Guatemala*.

89 INE, *Encuesta Nacional de Empleo e Ingresos, 2019, Principales Resultados* (Guatemala: INE, 2019). Agriculture and sales make up almost three-fifths of all workers' occupations (60 percent), with another 12 percent in manufacturing and mining, 9 percent in public administration, and 8 percent in other services, and 9 percent in construction, while a little more than 5 percent are in other professional occupations tied to finances, communications, and professional services.

90 IOM, *Encuesta sobre migración internacional*. See also the analysis in José Luis Rocha and Lizbeth Gramajo, *La migración en cinco municipios del altiplano occidental de Guatemala* (Guatemala City: USAID and Universidad Rafael Landívar, n.d.).

91 WFP, *Food Security and Emigration: Why People Flee and the Impact on Family Members Left Behind in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras* (Panama City: WFP, 2017).

92 Manuel Orozco, *Central American Migration: Current Changes and Development Implications* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2018).

for International Development (USAID),⁹³ and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean includes financial education as a major recommendation for future development strategies as well.⁹⁴

Remittances can be both a driver of migration and a pathway to alternatives. On one hand, people migrate because their other economic options—informal employment and agriculture, especially—provide so little compensation compared to what they might earn following migration and share with their families via remittances. At the same time, remittances, when they lead to investment in local economic activities, education, and better nutrition, can give people reasons not to migrate in the future.

Remittances can be both a driver of migration and a pathway to alternatives.

F. Violence and Corruption

Although in most studies, less than one-tenth of Guatemalans report violence as a primary reason for migration, it still factors into many people's decision-making.⁹⁵ This is more likely to be the case in the Guatemala City area and in the departments closest to El Salvador and Honduras, where gangs are well-established and often operate with impunity thanks to their ties to local authorities.⁹⁶

However, even in the Huehuetenango study conducted by the Catholic Diocese, which involved more than 400 families across the department, between 3 percent and 7 percent of those with family members who had migrated indicated that violence was their principal motive for moving.⁹⁷ In addition, 15 percent of those interviewed said that their family member abroad would be in danger if they returned, with many citing either family violence or fears of authorities or extortion.

This suggests that while violence might not be a principal motivator for most Guatemalans to migrate, as it is in parts of Honduras and El Salvador, it is still a relevant factor and for some may be an underlying condition shaping more immediate migration triggers. Depending on its nature, violence also affects different segments of the country's population and migration decision-making in different ways.

In a 2020 IOM study, for example, women were twice as likely as men to indicate that violence was their principal reason for leaving, suggesting there could be a link between domestic violence and migration.⁹⁸ The Guatemalan Statistical Institute reports a rate of family violence of between 500 to 600 per 100,000

93 USAID and Inter-American Dialogue (IAD), "Building Human and Economic Capital: A Strategy for Guatemala, 'Opportunities for My Community'" (working draft, USAID and IAD, June 2019).

94 UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Hacia un nuevo estilo de desarrollo*.

95 IOM, *Encuesta sobre Migración Internacional*. See also *Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México (EMIF Sur)*, *Boletín de Indicadores*, Julio-Septiembre 2020 (Tijuana, Mexico: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2020).

96 Guatemalan Ministry of the Interior, *Encuesta Nacional de Percepción de Seguridad Pública y Victimización en Guatemala, 2018* (Guatemala City: Guatemalan Ministry of the Interior, 2019); Sindy Hernández Bonilla, *Desplazamiento forzado interno en Guatemala: Diagnóstico 2010-2016* (Guatemala: Universidad Rafael Landívar, 2018); Cristosal and El Sistema Regional de Monitoreo, *Señales de una crisis: desplazamiento forzado interno por violencia en El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras, 2018* (N.p.: Cristosal and El Sistema Regional de Monitoreo, 2018).

97 Banegas, *Informe sobre migración en Huehuetenango*.

98 IOM, *Encuesta de medios de vida a población migrante retornada*.

residents across the country, with some annual variations.⁹⁹ And in another national survey, one in five women reported having been the victim of physical or sexual violence.¹⁰⁰ In the interviews conducted for this study, domestic violence was discussed as a possible reason why women migrate, although it is hard to determine its specific impact on migration decisions.

Disputes over land constitute another type of violence that can influence migration. For example, a USAID-commissioned study found that an increase in agricultural conflicts in a municipality was related to rural out-migration.¹⁰¹ In Huehuetenango, conflicts over “mega-projects,” primarily mining and hydroelectric projects, have also led to a number of incidents of violence in certain municipalities, and some interviewees described people fleeing the country during these conflicts, although it was not possible to confirm these specific cases.¹⁰²

Organized crime is another source of concern for public security. Associated with drug trafficking, it is exemplified by the Huista Cartel, which is based in the western part of Huehuetenango and has a large presence throughout the department.¹⁰³ Crime rates, overall, are quite low in the department,¹⁰⁴ but there are moments when violence breaks out between crime groups or people run afoul of cartel leadership.¹⁰⁵

There are also other forms of less visible violence that affect people in powerful ways, including extortion and corruption. A Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) survey found that being the victim of a crime was closely related to intentions to migrate, with victims of extortion 54 percent more likely to report an intention to migrate than other respondents. In the same study, almost one in five Guatemalans interviewed indicated that they had suffered the effects of government corruption in the past twelve months, and their intention to migrate was 83 percent greater than others who did not report experiences with corruption.¹⁰⁶ Corruption undermines people’s faith that conditions in their communities could ever get better or that they could find local alternatives to migration. Indeed, corruption was raised as an issue in almost every conversation the authors had with local actors about the possibilities of change in Huehuetenango.

Violence and corruption are, thus, undoubtedly triggers for some Huehuetenango residents’ decisions to migration,¹⁰⁷ but they are also deeply embedded in people’s lack of faith that their circumstances can change through any other means and, as such, they carry a much greater weight than what surveys may indicate.

99 INE, “*Violencia intrafamiliar*,” updated 2017.

100 Hernández Bonilla, *Desplazamiento forzado interno en Guatemala*. On this point, see also Cristosal and El Sistema Regional de Monitoreo, *Señales de una crisis*.

101 USAID, *Set Completo*.

102 Based on interviews with community leaders, service providers, and public authorities in Huehuetenango (see the Appendix).

103 InSight Crime, *Guatemala Elites and Organized Crime: The “Huistas”* (Washington, DC: InSight Crime, 2016).

104 Guatemalan Ministry of the Interior, *Encuesta Nacional de Percepción de Seguridad Pública y Victimización*.

105 There was a new outbreak of violence in late 2021 in Huehuetenango as the San Huista Cartel battled a rival organized crime group.

106 Dinorah Azpuru, Mariana Rodríguez, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister, *Cultura Política de la Democracia en Guatemala y en las Américas, 2016/17* (N.p.: USAID, LAPOP, ASIES, 2018).

107 See also Hernández Bonilla, *Desplazamiento forzado interno en Guatemala*; Cristosal and El Sistema Regional de Monitoreo, *Señales de una crisis*.

G. *Climate Events and Climate Change*

Climate events and natural disasters are another factor in some Guatemalans' migration decisions. In November 2020, Huehuetenango and other departments nearby were struck by two severe hurricanes. While some communities recovered quickly, others were still trying to rebuild infrastructure and restart their lives months later.¹⁰⁸ The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that Hurricanes Eta and Iota damaged 165,000 hectares of crops, leading to USD 4.3 million in agricultural losses in Guatemala.¹⁰⁹

Climate events have long driven Central Americans out of their homes and sometimes across international borders, but there are substantial reasons to believe that these events are increasing in number and frequency. Indeed, the larger trend appears to be towards more uncertain rainfall patterns, which have made agriculture a significantly less reliable livelihood than in the past.¹¹⁰ While this has not undermined the importance of agriculture for household economies, it has made farming a more risky venture for many families, since initial investments are not always recovered when harvests are less productive than expected.¹¹¹ Coffee, in particular, continues to be an important source of income for small producers, and total coffee production has increased in recent years.¹¹² It remains a vital cash crop for tens of thousands of families in Huehuetenango, who grow small plots of coffee on hillsides around the department. However, small producers incur greater risk—and often debt—because of climate-related unpredictability.¹¹³

Coffee rust, a fungus that attacks the coffee tree, has been another challenge for producers for about a decade, becoming a more prevalent issue in early 2013. While it destroyed about one-fifth of all coffee crops in Central America at its height, it mostly seems to be under control today. However, the fungicide needed to protect against coffee rust represents an additional cost, and the fungus adds another element of unpredictability to coffee production for small farmers.¹¹⁴

Migration is likely occurring both as a response to specific climate events, which are becoming more frequent, and as a way to protect family livelihoods against unpredictable rainfall.

Climate change deserves far greater study as a factor that may be contributing to changing migration patterns. Migration is likely occurring both as a response to specific climate events, which are becoming more frequent, and as a way to protect family livelihoods against unpredictable rainfall, which can lead

108 IOM, *Encuesta de medios de vida a hogares desplazados por tormentas en Alta Verapaz y Huehuetenango* (Guatemala City: IOM, 2021).

109 Karla Tay, *Preliminary Assessment of Eta and Iota Tropic Depressions Impact on Guatemalan Agriculture* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Global Agricultural Information Network, 2020).

110 Based on interviews with community leaders, service providers, and public authorities in Huehuetenango (see the Appendix).

111 Karla Tay, *Guatemala: Coffee Annual: Coffee International Prices Do Not Cover Costs for Small and Medium Size Farmers* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Global Agricultural Information Network, 2018).

112 INE, *Informe ENA 2019-2020*, 72.

113 Tay, *Preliminary Assessment of Eta and Iota Topical Depressions*. See also Daniel Stone, "Fungus, Climate Change Threatening Big Part of Global Coffee Supply," *National Geographic*, May 31, 2014; Gena Steffens, "Changing Climate Forces Desperate Guatemalans to Migrate," *National Geographic*, October 23, 2018.

114 USAID, "Disease-Resistant Plants Help Guatemala Recover from Coffee Rust," updated February 8, 2018; Karla Tay, *Guatemala: Coffee Annual: Coffee Farmers Struggle with Low Prices, Disease, and Weather* (Washington, DC: Department of Agriculture, Global Agricultural Information Network, 2019).

to occasional poor harvests and debt. However, too little is yet known about how climate and migration dynamics interact in Central America.

4 Building Alternatives to Unauthorized Migration

Migration from Huehuetenango and the Western Highlands to the United States is almost certain to continue for some time. Many Guatemalans, including those in Huehuetenango, have discovered that it is the best way to help their family get ahead in life, and they have developed the social networks and financial model to make it possible. The desire to migrate is compounded by the sense that the state is absent and unlikely to ever provide the kind of basic opportunities and services—including education and health care—that people need, much less the conditions for financial access, entrepreneurship, and employment creation that would present a reason to stay. And in Huehuetenango, violence and corruption are a backdrop—and an important, if more occasional, trigger—for migration, as is the changing climate, which has made agricultural production less reliable and less predictable.

However, even in the absence of a robust state presence, strategies exist that could help manage migration better and that could support alternative pathways toward development that might encourage people to stay, taking advantage of the deep sense of *arraigo* or belonging that already exists. Below are a few ideas that emerged from this study.

A. Creating Legal Pathways for Circular Migration

Since migration is likely to remain a major strategy for families across Guatemala—and especially in Huehuetenango—for the foreseeable future, finding ways to enable movement through legal channels rather than irregular ones makes eminent sense. Such pathways should form a complement to efforts to address the specific drivers of migration. And these pathways can leverage the *arraigo* that ties people to their communities and makes circularity particularly important for most Guatemalan migrants.

One arena for immediate focus is on seasonal labor migration, which is well-developed from Guatemala to southern Mexico but almost entirely absent to the United States. In the U.S. fiscal year 2020, 3,805 seasonal visas (2,123 H-2As and 1,682 H-2Bs) were issued to Guatemalans.¹¹⁵ Meanwhile, the Canadian government issued 9,683 visas to Guatemalans through its Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program (SAW).¹¹⁶

A concerted effort to develop temporary labor pathways to the United States, Canada, Europe, and even central and northern Mexico, which have more robust labor markets beyond the southern parts of the country, could provide legal alternatives to irregular migration over the short to medium term for many people in the Western Highlands.¹¹⁷ However, these opportunities would have to be transparent and

115 U.S. Department of State, “Nonimmigrant Visa Issuances by Visa Class and by Nationality – FY2020 NIV Detail Table,” accessed November 3, 2021.

116 Statistics Canada, “Countries of Citizenship for Temporary Foreign Workers in the Agricultural Sector,” accessed October 30, 2021.

117 Cristobal Ramón, *Investing in Alternatives to Irregular Migration from Central America: Options to Expand U.S. Employment Pathways* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).

accessible to people in rural parts of the country in order for them to become effective alternatives to irregular migration.

Similarly, expanding the Central American Minors (CAM) Program might permit some reunification with family in the United States through legal channels and allow children and youth to avoid making dangerous, unaccompanied journeys north.¹¹⁸ Expanding refugee resettlement programs for those identified as in imminent danger would also help a small number of people, though it might be a less frequently used pathway in the Western Highlands, where persecution is less frequently cited as a primary reason for leaving.

These opportunities would have to be transparent and accessible to people in rural parts of the country in order for them to become effective alternatives to irregular migration.

It is unlikely that legal pathways to the United States and other common destination countries in the region will ever match the scale of demand for migration from Huehuetenango or from Guatemala as a whole. It will also be important to invest in ways of mitigating the violence that often happens on irregular journeys. Still, increasing the availability of legal options would likely begin to shift at least some current migration pressures into legal pathways over time.¹¹⁹

B. Building the Local Infrastructure for Development

Much of the push to give Guatemalans alternatives to irregular migration will have to focus on creating the basic infrastructure for people to have decent livelihoods where they live. This begins with basic services, such as education and health care, but also extends to financial access and credit, physical infrastructure, and employment.

While the Guatemalan government should be responsible for basic education and health care, the international community can play a role in improving access and innovation in these areas.¹²⁰ One promising area of intervention is technical education, which bridges the gap between basic schooling and the development of specific skills that can aid in individuals' insertion in the workforce. The Guatemalan government sponsors the Instituto Técnico de Capacitación y Productividad (INTECAP), a public/private institution in charge of technical education in Guatemala, which also receives support and guidance from the business community. While it is generally recognized as high quality, its centers are primarily located in capital cities far from where most people, including those in Huehuetenango, actually live. There are also important efforts by nongovernmental groups to create technical education across the country, such as the Catholic Church's Fe y Alegría schools, including one in the municipality of Chiantla in Huehuetenango.

118 Mark Greenberg et al., *Relaunching the Central American Minors Program: Opportunities to Enhance Child Safety and Family Reunification* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).

119 Selee and Ruiz Soto, *Building a New Regional Migration System*.

120 One extensive study of education policy suggests convincingly that a major push around education over the next ten years could add USD 30 billion to GDP, pull more than a half million people out of poverty, and reduce migration pressures significantly. See Alex Porter et al., *Assessing the Guatemalan Education System: A Macro Analysis of Current Trends and Possible Futures* (Denver: USAID and Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, 2019).

These private and public/private institutions provide a good foundation on which to build much greater access to technical education in the future. Of course, these efforts are more meaningful in locations that already have robust employment possibilities, such as near larger towns and cities, but they could also foster innovative models of education relevant for students in rural communities.

Similarly, ensuring basic health care and nutritional access is critical for improving the quality of life in rural communities. Both the 2021 study by MPI, the World Food Program, and MIT Civic Data Design Lab discussed above and a separate evaluation of existing USAID health-care and nutrition programs in the Western Highland suggest that there is a link between better nutrition and less propensity to migrate.¹²¹ Extending free or low-cost health care to poor rural communities would take away one major expense and driver of migration for many families in the Western Highlands.

Improving financial inclusion and access to credit is another major opportunity. For example, finding ways of banking remittances that generate credit access may help both remittance recipients and the larger community. When remittances are banked in locally rooted institutions, it allows recipients to have greater security in their investments and make strategic decisions about their use. Ensuring that banks, cooperatives, and micro-lending institutions can reach communities in the Western Highlands, and that those who have savings from migration (both return migrants and households that have been able to save the remittances they receive) have access to credit to start small and micro-businesses, would increase the possibilities of successful local entrepreneurship.¹²²



Another key opportunity is to strengthen market access for both agricultural and manufactured products, finding ways of placing them higher in the value chain. There are also important efforts underway to market goods from producers directly to consumers, ensuring a better price to the producers involved. In San Antonio Huista, Huehuetango, for example, the Vicafe Cooperative brings together young farmers, mostly in their twenties, who market their coffee together by following quality guidelines and selling at a higher price to specialized coffee companies.¹²³ Next door in Unión Cantinil, another coffee cooperative sells most of its production to the son of one of its members who operates a coffee shop in the United States, getting a higher price than they could by selling on the open market.¹²⁴ Many organizations (including cooperatives and associations of small producers) already exist to market products more effectively, though sometimes in constrained ways; these can serve as important foundations to build on.

121 Manuel A. Hernandez, "Association between USAID/Guatemala Programs in the Western Highlands and Migration: Preliminary Results" (presentation, USAID, May 15, 2019); Ruiz Soto et al., *Charting a New Regional Course of Action*.

122 Manuel Orozco and Julia Yansura, *Confronting the Challenges of Migration and Development in Central America* (Washington, DC: Inter-American Dialogue, 2015). See also Kemme, *Determinants of Migration*.

123 Interview with José López, founder of Vicafe Cooperative in San Antonio Huista, Huehuetenango, June 17, 2021.

124 Interview with Juan Luis Sandoval, owner of La Coop in Washington, DC, July 8, 2021.

Market access also depends heavily on infrastructure, including the kind of access roads that connect communities to major roads and highways. Improving this infrastructure should largely be the responsibility of the Guatemalan government, but international financial institutions can help, especially with financing for infrastructure.

Although Guatemalans cite violence less frequently than economic factors as their reason for migrating, it remains an underling cause for many people and may be a powerful trigger for some, especially women. In Huehuetenango, as in much of Guatemala, there is still too little support for programs that help women affected by domestic violence pursue their legal options. And there has been insufficient attention to date to addressing the conditions that feed into domestic violence. Meanwhile, investments in hydroelectric projects, which have led to recurrent conflicts, need to be re-evaluated and restructured to create community buy-in or they will remain another source of violence in Western Highlands communities.

In some cases, it will be important to distinguish between those strategies that may help stop sudden surges of migration, such as those targeted at reducing violence or adjusting to climate events, versus those that may only have an impact on migration patterns over a longer period of time, such as investments in education and health care, but which may also produce deep, long-term changes.

C. *Investing in People as Agents of Change*

One of the most powerful strategies for fostering development is leveraging the support and social assets of local communities. This involves working with existing social infrastructure and community members as partners and agents of change, as well as with migrants who continue to be connected to their communities from abroad and those who return after a period away.

Supporting existing efforts to build leadership among youth, women, small producers, and other key groups can have multiplication effects over time. These efforts already exist through grassroots organizations (including some supported by USAID and the Inter-American Foundation), as well as through Guatemalan nongovernmental organizations that have credibility and presence throughout communities in the Western Highlands.

Investing in local leadership also builds virtuous cycles for accountability and public service, helping local residents strengthen their capacity to demand needed government investments and hold elected authorities accountable for results. One key finding of this study is that there is an enormous amount of social capital and local organization within Huehuetenango, which can be leveraged to set the direction of development efforts. This social capital is especially strong in local communities with a deep sense of *arraigo*, where this sense of belonging—coupled with increased local livelihood options—could act as a powerful force encouraging residents to stay rather than migrate.

Diaspora organizations play a dynamic role in contributing to infrastructure development in communities of origin, and there are multiple diaspora organizations with strong links to Huehuetenango that could be

involved in future decisions on development.¹²⁵ One key advantage that migrant-led organizations have is that they usually lie outside the usual political networks, which sometimes gives them greater leverage to support accountability efforts by local communities.¹²⁶

As several researchers have signaled, return migrants also represent significant untapped potential.¹²⁷ They often bring both new skills and savings that can be employed in productive ventures.¹²⁸ Targeting return migrants as potential players in development efforts could be a fruitful area of focus. INTECAP has started a pilot program to certify the skills return migrants acquired abroad, even those not backed by specific certificates or degrees. Moreover, ensuring that return migrants can access financial markets based on their savings or providing low-cost credit to them to augment savings and convert these into investments (in return for registering a business for tax purposes, for example) could be particularly smart strategies that create incentives for migrants to return and pursue entrepreneurship in their home communities.

The prospects for migrants who were deported are a little different. Some have left family abroad, and they very often come back to Guatemala disillusioned and with a sense of failure. In many cases, they have incurred debt in order to migrate that they cannot now pay off. This is a strong incentive to migrate again.¹²⁹ Investing in the successful reintegration of return migrants is a smart policy that may prevent some future irregular migration by giving people options to start their lives over in their home communities.¹³⁰

5 Conclusion

There is no single strategy that will slow unauthorized migration or even provide a credible alternative for most families in the Guatemalan Highlands. However, there are approaches that, over time, can create meaningful opportunities for people who choose not to migrate and better conditions for human development that allow people to make a good life where they live. Government will have to be responsible for much of the provision of needed services, but international cooperation agencies, development banks, and private philanthropy can also contribute effectively and strategically.

125 Dirk Bornschein and Santos Cuc, *Asociaciones de migrantes en los Estados Unidos: Del sueño de contribuir en Guatemala, a una realidad llena de retos* (Guatemala City: FLACSO, 2020).

126 This was a major finding of studies on Mexican migrant engagement with communities of origin during that country's period of significant emigration to the United States. See, for example, Xochitl Bada, Jonathan Fox, and Andrew Selee, eds., *Invisible No More: Mexican Migrant Civic and Political Participation in the United States* (Washington: Wilson Center, 2007).

127 On this point, see Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Caitlyn Yates, Luis Argueta, and Diego Chaves-González, *Expanding Reception and Reintegration Services for Migrants Returning to Central America* (Washington, DC: MPI, forthcoming); Lizbeth Gramajo Bauer, *"Otra vez a lo mismo": migración de retorno y procesos de reintegración en el altiplano occidental de Guatemala* (Guatemala City: Universidad Rafael Landívar, 2019).

128 Those who return voluntarily are likely to have succeeded in their goals or at least to have made a choice about returning. They often bring enhanced human capital, leadership skills, new values, and savings from their trip abroad. There are positive elements of this, especially around new skills (including what one group of migration researchers has called "the skills of the unskilled") and sometimes values and leadership. But return to the family after long periods away can also generate conflict, especially when men try to reassert control over family affairs that have been run by women or older children during their absence. On these points, see Gramajo Bauer, *"Otra vez a lo mismo."* See also Úrsula Roldan, *Estar aquí y estar allá* (Guatemala City: Universidad Rafael Landívar, 2016).

129 One longitudinal study of deported migrants found that 37 percent plan to migrate again, with 28 percent citing debt and 25 percent citing family ties. See Inkpen and Pitts, *Longitudinal Study of Deportees in Guatemala*.

130 Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas, Luis Argueta, and Randy Capps, *Sustainable Reintegration: Strategies to Support Migrants Returning to Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019).

Building these alternatives requires long-term engagement with community leaders to help tailor these approaches to maximize their relevance and impact in different local contexts. Knowing the existing social infrastructure within specific communities and building on existing organizational structures—including the range of community-based organizations, cooperatives, and trusted intermediary nongovernmental organizations that have an on-the-ground presence and credibility—may often be better than starting entirely new programs from the outside. Return migrants and diaspora organizations are two other sets of actors that may provide important ideas and support for development efforts if they are engaged proactively.

In the meantime, efforts to build out legal pathways that allow Guatemalans to sign up for temporary employment-based opportunities in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Europe; to reunite with relatives already abroad; and to access humanitarian protection for those in need are critical alternatives to irregular migration. In the short term, this may be the most feasible way of managing migration, while other strategies that provide people in Huehuetenango and the Western Highlands realistic alternatives to migration are under construction.

Building these alternatives requires long-term engagement with community leaders to help tailor these approaches to maximize their relevance and impact in different local contexts.

Appendix. Study Fieldwork and Background Conversations

Visits in Huehuetenango

Two research visits were undertaken as part of this study. The first, in May and June 2021, was conducted by Ernesto Alejandro Ramírez on behalf of the Asociación Pop No'j. This visit involved research in the following municipalities within Huehuetenango: Jacaltenango, San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, San Pedro Necta, and Unión Cantinil. Interviews were conducted with community leaders, service providers, and public authorities in each of these four municipalities.

The second research trip was undertaken jointly by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and the Asociación Pop No'j from June 15–18, 2021. Research was conducted by the authors of this study, Juan José Hurtado Paz y Paz, Luis Argueta, and Andrew Selee. During this trip, the researchers visited the following municipalities and localities in Huehuetenango: Chiantla, Colotenango, Huehuetenango, Jacaltenango, La Mesilla, San Antonio Huista, and San Pedro Necta. The researchers met with community leaders, services providers, and public authorities in each of these municipalities.

Background Conversations

In addition to the research in Huehuetenango, the researchers, generally Luis Argueta and Andrew Selee, spoke with a number of other individuals in Guatemala who have broad expertise on different aspects of migration and development in the country. Some of these were specific background conversations for the project; others were conversations in groups held at the Asociación de Investigación y Estudios Sociales (ASIES), Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), and Rafael Landívar University; and a few were conversations for other projects that, nonetheless, contributed to thinking for this report. All of these conversations took place between May and August 2021, mostly in person but with a handful conducted by phone or video call.

Individual and Group Interviews

Marcel Arévalo, Coordinator, Poverty, Migration, and Development Program, FLACSO-Guatemala

Juan Luis Barrios, President, National Coffee Association

Jahir Dabroy, Coordinator of the Sociopolitical Research Division, ASIES

Edgar Esquit, Professor and Researcher of the Institute of Inter-Ethnic Studies and Indigenous Peoples, University of San Carlos

José Luis González, Coordinator, Jesuit Migration Service

Julia González Deras, Coordinator, National Migration Council of Guatemala

Matilde González-Izás, Independent Scholar and Consultant, United Nations Development Program (UNDP)

Lizbeth del Rosario Gramajo, Researcher, Institute of Research and Projection on Global and Territorial Dynamics, Rafael Landívar University

Pablo Hurtado, Secretary General, ASIES

Juan José López, Researcher, ASIES

Julie López, Freelance Writer and Journalist

Mario Marroquín, former Executive Director, Goldcorp, and former Senior Counselor at the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)

Rosario Martínez, Researcher, FLACSO-Guatemala

Jonathan Menkos, Director, Central American Institute of Fiscal Studies (ICEFI)

Jorge Morales Toj, Maya K'iche' Lawyer and Writer

Alfonso Muralles, Vice President, National Business Council (CNE)

Bernarda Peralta, Director, Centinelas

Anupama Rajaraman, Mission Director, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Guatemala

Álvaro Ramazzini, Cardinal and Bishop of Huehuetenango

Virgilio Reyes, Director, FLACSO-Guatemala

Úrsula Roldán, Director, Institute of Research and Projection on Global and Territorial Dynamics, Rafael Landívar University

Conversations and Interviews Conducted as Part of Separate Projects

Mauricio Catalán, Director of Family Remittances, Banrural

William W. Popp, U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala

Elvia Raquec, Program Director, Women's Justice Initiative, and Maya Kaqchikel Leader

Rafael Rodríguez Pellecer, Minister of Labor and Social Welfare of Guatemala

Eduardo Stein, former Vice President and Foreign Affairs Minister

César Tojón Vásquez, Director, Cooperation Association for the Western Rural Development (CDRO)

Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, Visiting Professor, Stanford University, and Maya K'iche' Scholar

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Andrew Selee is President of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI). His research focuses on migration globally, with a special emphasis on Latin America and the United States. He is the author and editor of several books, including *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (PublicAffairs, 2018) and his articles on migration in the Americas have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Policy*, among other publications.

Selee teaches at Georgetown University, and he worked previously at the Wilson Center, where he was Director of the Mexico Institute, Vice President for Programs, and Executive Vice President. He also worked on migration and development programs in Tijuana, Mexico for several years and in the U.S. House of Representatives. He received his PhD in policy studies from the University of Maryland; his MA in Latin American studies from the University of California, San Diego; and his BA from Washington University in St. Louis.



LUIS ARGUETA  @luisarguetaa

Luis Argueta is an award-winning Guatemalan American filmmaker known for his multinational immigrant narratives. His coming-of-age film, *The Silence of Neto* (1994), was Guatemala's first Oscar submission. His series of immigration documentaries includes *abUSed: The Postville Raid* (2010), *ABRAZOS* (2014), *The U Turn* (2017), and *Ausencia* (forthcoming). Mr. Argueta has also lectured and served as a consultant and researcher on immigration-related issues.

Mr. Argueta is the only filmmaker to receive the Order of the Quetzal, Guatemala's highest honor, and *The Guardian* has listed him as one of Guatemala's National Living Icons. In 2019, he received the Harris Wofford Global Citizen Award from the National Peace Corps Association, and he has been named 2021–22 Lund-Gill Chair at Dominican University.



JUAN JOSÉ HURTADO PAZ Y PAZ

Juan José Hurtado Paz y Paz has been the General Director of the Asociación Pop No'j since 2015 and was previously its Technical Coordinator and one of its founding members. Through his studies, work, and lifelong commitment to social development, he has developed deep knowledge of the economic, social, political, and environmental realities of Guatemala and Mesoamerica. He has worked in several development and human rights organizations, both Guatemalan and international, and has been part of social movements and social organizations.

Dr. Paz y Paz holds a doctorate in education from La Salle University in Costa Rica and a BA in communications from the Rafael Landívar University in Guatemala City, where he has also taught classes.

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