

Chiapas: immigration, migration and migratory transit territory *

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Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es explorar la condición del estado de Chiapas como territorio de movilidad laboral transfronteriza, así como su creciente participación en la emigración intrarregional, nacional e internacional y su situación como espacio de tránsito migratorio de personas —guatemaltecos en su mayoría, y centroamericanos en general— que se dirigen a otras entidades mexicanas y a Estados Unidos en busca de oportunidades laborales. Para ello se analiza información que proporcionan el Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, el Consejo Nacional de Población, el Instituto Nacional de Migración y dos encuestas de flujos en las que participa El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.

Palabras clave: Chiapas, movilidad transfronteriza, tránsito migratorio, migración interna, migración internacional.

Abstract

Chiapas: immigration, migration and migratory transit territory

The main objective of this article is to explore the current status of Chiapas as a territory of cross-border labor mobility, as well as the Chiapas emergent participation in the intra-regional, national and international migratory flows, and its position as a space of transit for people who are moving through its territory trying to find a job in another Mexican State or in the United States, most of these people are from Guatemala and Central American. Information provided by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, the Consejo Nacional de Población, the Instituto Nacional de Migración and two surveys available from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte is examined.

Key words: Chiapas, cross-border mobility, transit migration, national migration, international migration.

Introduction

Germán Martínez Velasco, in his doctoral thesis (1999), asked why people from Chiapas, in contrast to those from Oaxaca, did not emigrate looking for working opportunities out of their state. That situation seems to be changing rapidly in less than a decade, since emigration from Chiapas has increased in a remarkable way, reaching among their primary destinations the Mayan Riviera, the northern Mexican border and the U.S. An increasing

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participation of Chiapas population has been registered in recent years in terms of long-distance migratory movements, which are especially known from the numbers registered by official sources regarding the amount of remittances sent from other states or abroad. At the same time, Chiapas is taking up the stance of a state of immigration and migratory transit for Central American workers, mostly Guatemalans that head for their territory, other Mexican states and the U. S., looking essentially for employment opportunities.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the current condition of Chiapas as territory of labor immigration, as a state that expels emigrants that head for the rest of the country and U.S., and as a space and migratory transit route mostly for Guatemalans, but also for Central Americans and emigrants from other nationalities. In order to achieve this, we use information provided by the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Computing (INEGI), the National Council of Population, the National Institute of Migration (INM) and two surveys on flows in which *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte* takes part.

Migratory flows and circuits from and to Chiapas

As one can observe in table 1, from the four states bordering the south of Mexico, Chiapas is the one with higher international adjacency, since its border with Guatemala extends along 654 kilometers, an amount that longitudinally represents 68.4% of the Mexican southern border. Having 4.3 million inhabitants, Chiapas also concentrates the highest number of residents of the bordering states of the south of Mexico, a population that represents a bit more than half (52.4 percent) of the four.

According to the National Council of Population, Chiapas was second in 2005 at a national level given its index and level of high marginalization, however some of its socioeconomic indicators give it the first place. For example, almost 60 percent of Chiapas people live in towns with less than five thousand inhabitants (58.46 percent); the fifth part of their population is illiterate (21.32 percent); four out of ten inhabitants who are 15 or older did not finish their primary education (42.76 percent), and a bit less than three fourths of its employed population (78.14 percent) received an income below two minimum wages (Comapo, 2005: 56). Nevertheless, given its geographical situation, Chiapas is a state that registers intense entrance and exit flows, especially movements of labor nature.

Chiapas: immigration, migration and migratory transit territory / M. Anguiano

TABLE 1
POPULATION OF THE MEXICAN SOUTHERN BORDER STATES 2006
AND TERRITORIAL EXTENSION NEIGHBORING GUATEMALA

State	State population	Regional percentage	Border with Guatemala (km)	Regional percentage
Chiapas	4 363 413	52.41	654 68	.41
Tabasco	2 017 710	24.23	112 11	.72
Quintana Roo*	1 175 475	14.12	24	2.51
Campeche	768 222	9.24	166 17	.36
Regional total	8 324 820	100.0	956	100

* Quintana Roo also borders Belice along 176 kilometers.

Source: Conapo, *Prontuario demográfico de México 2007*; at <http://www.conapo.gob.mx/prontuario2007/prontuario.htm>, and Chávez, in print.

Inside what is now the Chiapas state, even before its integration into the Mexican territory, there had been movements of labor nature in which population headed for or through their towns to be mainly employed in activities of the primary sector. Nowadays, through different parts of the international Chiapas border, foreign workers enter and return. They are mainly Central American employed in agricultural labor in the Soconusco region, and in the construction, trade and services sectors in other towns of the state. This mobility has stretched out to other states of the southern Mexican region. In most recent decades, Tapachula, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Comitán de Domínguez and San Cristobal de las Casas have been consolidated as urban destinies for new migratory flows. As a conclusion of a recent research work states:

The agrarian distribution, the increase in the communication roads and the concentration of economic activities in the cities have been determining factors both for the growth and the direction that the population movements had in Chiapas during the last 35 years (Jáuregui and Ávila, 2007: 8).

Most of the transborder workers come from Guatemala and in smaller amounts natives from Honduras and El Salvador. Likewise, individuals and families cross Chiapas' territory heading for other Mexican states or the U. S. in the search for a better life and employment conditions. The most considerable entrance and exit of transborder flows and of those other flows that travel a

longer distance, take place in Ciudad Hidalgo, Talismán and Ciudad Cuauhtémoc. They are important connection places given their land communication routes with Central America, the state of Chiapas and the rest of México (EMIF, 2006).

According to the National Institute of Migration, coffee, banana and sugar cane plantations as well as farms located in the bordering strip with Guatemala employ annually 40,000 Guatemalan day laborers, they are properly registered and have the documents that said institution requires (INM, 2007: 6); an amount that does not count other workers without that kind of authorization. In 2006, said Institute reported that the higher number of seizures of non-authorized foreigners was recorded in the regional delegations of the state of Chiapas, this fact makes this state concentrate almost half of all the seizures of people without identity papers during 2006, in accordance to table 2.

The number of registered agricultural workers shows the significance of the state as receiver of flows of transborder labor and at the same time it expresses the intense short-distance international mobility that takes place in the state, that not only is represented by these workers, but also by other kind of visitors and residents of the Mexican-Guatemalan bordering region, who travel on a daily basis and due to other reasons (family or commerce) between the neighboring towns of the two countries. On their part, the 90,601 seizures of non-authorized foreigners that were registered in Chiapas during 2006 justify its position as migratory transit state, which sends migrants towards other regions of the country and towards the U. S. since in that same year INM reported that 400,000 migrants who lacked migratory documents attempted to cross the national territory had the U. S. as a destination (INM, 2007: 3)

TABLE 2
SEIZINGS REGISTERED BY INM, 2006

Regional delegations	January-December	Percentage
Chiapas	90 601	49.6
Tabasco	23 387	12.8
Veracruz	17 122	9.4
Federal District	5 653	3.1
Other States	45 942	25.1
Total 18	2 705	100.0

Source: National Institute of Migration, 2007: 7.

With regard to the migration flows, Chiapas people recently take part in the regional migratory system constituted by states of the south of the country, the national migration towards other states of the country and the international emigration that has the U. S. as a destiny. In the regional environment, the diversity of activities that are linked to the oil-extraction industry in Campeche and Tabasco, as well as those derived from the intense touristic activity in the Mayan Riviera, and the increase and expansion of the commerce and service sectors in the urban centers of Cancún, Chetumal, Campeche and Villahermosa have attracted workers from Chiapas and Central America (Chávez *et al.*, in print).

In the national migratory context, according to the definitive results of the II Population and Housing Count, between 2000 and 2005, a bit more than 24,000 people made Chiapas their residence state, half of them came from 4 specific Mexican states: Tabasco, State of Mexico, Federal District and Veracruz. In contrast, the same source reported that 90,000 people left the state, their main destinations inside the country were, according to their percentage of participation, Baja California, Quintana Roo, State of Mexico, Tabasco, Federal District, Veracruz and Oaxaca, which are states whose overall number added up to zero percent of the total of Chiapas emigrants in the national territory, as described in table 3.

Apart from the numbers, the information in table 3 allows to see the migratory circuits in which Chiapas people move. One of short distance, located in the states of the south of the country (Tabasco, Veracruz, Quintana Roo, Oaxaca); another of traditional nature in the national environment, located in the center of the country and constituted by the Federal District and the State of Mexico. The third circuit extends towards the northern Mexican border, having as primary destiny the state of Baja California and possibly jointed beyond the U. S. border.

On the one hand, it is worth mentioning that among the immigrants who arrived to Baja California between 2000 and 2005, Chiapas people had the third place, only preceded by those from the states of Sinaloa and Sonora, who are traditional migrants towards Baja California. On the other, it is important to highlight that Tijuana received the great majority of these Chiapas immigrants, since eight out of ten of them arrived to live in that mostly urban municipality. Similarly, Chiapas people that emigrated to Quintana Roo headed mostly (88 percent) for two of its eight municipalities: half of them to Benito Juarez (where Cancún lies) and four out of ten to Solidaridad, the municipality where Playa del Carmen is located (INEGI, 2005: CD).

TABLE 3
PERCENTAGE PARTICIPATION OF IMMIGRANTS AND EMIGRANTS,
CHIAPAS, 2000-2005

	Immigrants	Emigrants	
Tabasco	14	.4	Baja California
State of Mexico	13.6	13.6	Quintana Roo
Federal District	12.1	12.1	State of Mexico
Veracruz	11	.5	Tabasco
Oaxaca	9	.7	Federal District
Baja California		4.8	Veracruz
Puebla	4	.7	Oaxaca
Percentage subtotal		70.8	Percentage subtotal
Total number	24 073		Total number
			90 000

Source: INEGI, *Definite Results of II Count of Population and Housing, 2005*.

The information presented and analyzed up to this part allows us to verify that in recent years Chiapas has been a territory of migratory attraction for people coming from neighboring states (Tabasco, Veracruz and Oaxaca), from the center of the country (State of Mexico, Federal District and Puebla) and even from the northern border (Baja California), as well as, in a numerous and increasing manner, for agricultural workers from Guatemala. On its side, emigration of Chiapas people has been typical and recurrent towards short-distance destinies located in the southern region of the country (especially to the neighboring states: Tabasco, Veracruz and Oaxaca) and towards the two states that in the national environment constitute the traditionally recipient zone of the center of the country (Federal District and State of Mexico), but in recent years they incorporated to their territorial mobility destinies with longer distances. Despite the fact that in the south of the country the state of Quintana Roo exercises a strong migratory attraction given its touristic development, Chiapas people have increasingly ventured to make longer routes, especially towards Mexico's northern border. From the 90,000 Chiapas people that emigrated between 2000 and 2005, about 16,000 headed for Baja California, a number that places this distant bordering state of the north of the country in the first place as national destiny for Chiapas emigration.

Finally, as we will show next, an increase in the flow of those who aimed at emigrating to the U.S. has been registered in recent years.

Exploring the surveys on migratory flows

In cooperation with institutions of the public and academic sectors *El Colegio de la Frontera Norte* performs surveys on migratory flows in the north and south borders of Mexico. These sources of information allow exploring the sociodemographic characteristics and the dynamic of the flows that move through these regions, as well as providing elements for the analysis of their territorial mobility.

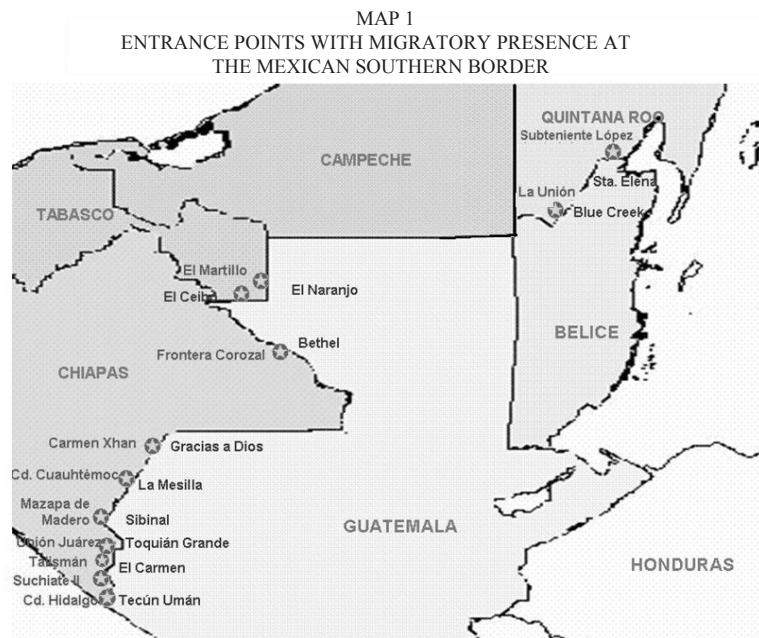
As mentioned before, one of the labor flows that arrive to the state is that of Central Americans, mostly from Guatemala, who are employed in Chiapas regions and towns, or also, that head for other Mexican states or move through the state in transit towards the U. S., and that enter into different towns located at the border between Guatemala and Mexico. Map 1 allows geographically locating that diversity of points of entrance and highlighting that the great majority of them occurs in the Chiapas border.

The *Survey on Migration in the Guatemala-Mexico Border* (EMIF/Guamex), which collects the flow of Guatemalan labor migrants that entered by land through the Chiapas border to Mexico, allows us to say that almost half of these movements were not exactly migrants, but most precisely “transborder workers”, since during the three years of continuous surveying from 2004 to 2006, between 47 and 53 percent of the group said that they would remain in Mexico only during the labor working day, returning to their origin towns in less than 24 hours.

This behavior has differential and contrasting tendencies between men and women, since in the feminine group the stay for one day was the most common (around 79 percent), while among men, almost six out of ten entered to remain for more than one day. The same source allows examining the socioeconomic profile of these workers.

1. Although most of them were males, one can observe an increasing tendency in the feminine participation: from 18 percent in 2004 to 25 percent in 2006. Their ages were concentrated between 15 and 40 years, that is, in the most active stage of productive life; a typical concentration of the labor migrations. Nevertheless, age groups also have differential behaviors by sex and time

¹ It refers to the set of persons interviewed that were born in Guatemala and were 15 years or older, whose displacement or entrance to Mexico was to work or look for work and that entered to the country through the following Chiapas towns: Ciudad Hidalgo, Talismán and Ciudad Cuauhtémoc (EMIF, 2004).



Source: INM, Conapo, STPS, SRE, Colef Survey on migration at the Guatemala-Mexico Border 2004, Mexico, 2006: 23.

of stay in Mexico. Males that remained more than one day were younger, since half of them were younger than 30; while the highest concentration of women was seen among those who remained less than a day and whose ages fluctuated between 20 and 39 years.

2. With regard to the displacement and the occupation sectors in these destinies, most of the proportion headed for a farm, ranch or an ejido in Chiapas and the Tapachula and Ciudad Hidalgo cities, aiming at employment in farming activities four out of ten, and in smaller proportions in commerce and services (three and two out of ten, respectively). This behavior also had variations by sex and remaining time, since among males most of those who would remain more than one day headed for the agricultural sector while among women that sector of services, whereas men and women that remain less than one day aimed at being employed mostly in the commerce (formal or informal) sector. Consequently, employment of men and women in agriculture and services require staying for more than one day while those who had commercial activities tend to enter and return during the same day

Chiapas: immigration, migration and migratory transit territory / M. Anguiano

3. It is worth mentioning that most of these Guatemalan workers entered into Mexico using the local pass or Migratory form of local visitor (FMVL), and despite the fact that four out of ten perform agricultural labor, scarcely one out of ten had the Migratory form of agricultural visitor (FMVA). That shows that the figures of agricultural workers that were registered officially under said form (forty thousand workers annually) underestimate the real size of those who really work in that activity.
4. Finally, the huge majority of the interviewees came from Guatemalan departments that border or are close to the border, 70 percent of them from San Marcos and 18 percent from Quetzaltenango, and only six percent from non-bordering departments, a fact which corroborates the importance of the region as space of mobility of the transborder flows of Guatemalans in Chiapas.

To sum up, the EMIF/Guamex allow us to see two flows of Guatemalan workers that in rather similar proportions entered through the south of the Chiapas state: those who returned the same day and those who remained longer. In both flows, the feminine participation has an increasing tendency. These transborder flows of short distance that come at large-scale from the bordering Guatemalan departments of San Marcos and Quetzaltenango and circulate through Tecún Umán-Ciudad Hidalgo and El Carmen-Talismán and in small quantity through La Mesilla-Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, have mostly, as sectorial and geographical destiny, the agricultural work in a farm, ejido or ranch in Chiapas and in smaller proportion, employment (and possibly self-employment) in commercial activities and that of services in the bordering region and in the Tapachula and Ciudad Hidalgo cities.

In an opposite direction, the same source allows us to examine the flow of Guatemalan migrants returned by the Mexican migratory authorities. With regard to them, it is worth highlighting the following:

1. In 2004 and 2005, eight out of ten and in 2006 six out of ten headed for the U. S., so that when they were detained and returned by Mexican authorities, they resulted to be an efficient filter that prevented their arrival and entrance to the neighboring northern country, constituting at the same time the Mexican territory as a very long vertical border (Casillas, 2006).

² A proportion that could have diminished this last year due to the devastation caused by Hurricane, that devastated the region in October 2005.

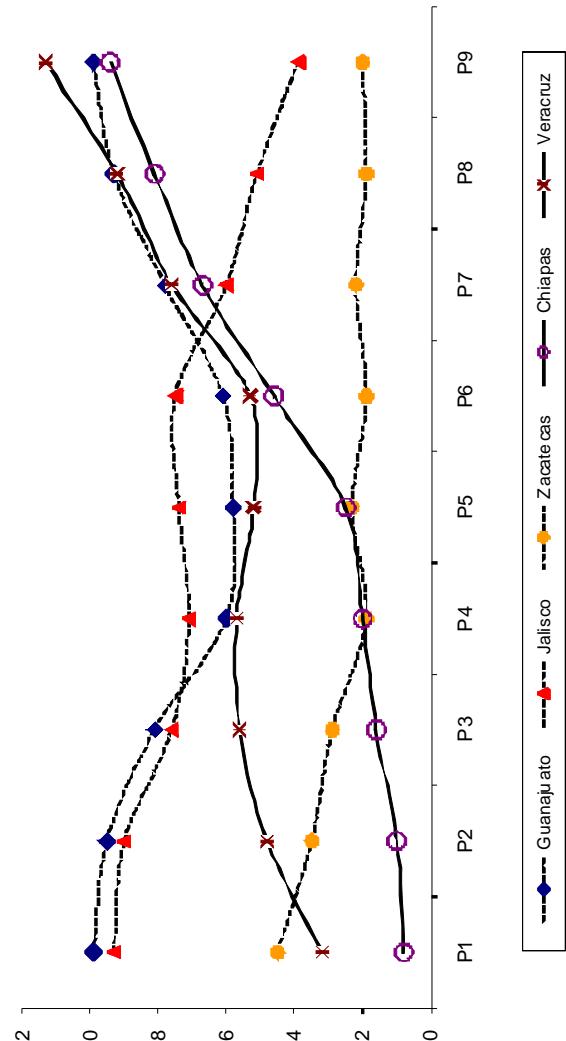
2. In the first two years of the survey, around half of the interviewees had stayed most of the time in Chiapas before being detained and returned to Guatemala. Adding up other states of the south of the country (in descending percentage order of participation: Veracruz, Tabasco, Oaxaca and Quintana Roo), the number reached up to seven out of ten Guatemalans detained and returned from that region. From 2004 to 2006, other Mexican states increased their participation as places with longer remaining time for Guatemalans that headed for the U. S. crossing through Mexico, a total of 13 to 27 percent in that period, an amount that indicates, on the one hand, the dispersion reached in their mobility and, on the other, the correlative size that the detentions have acquired on the side of the Mexican migratory authorities in national territory.
3. In contrast to the displacements of transborder workers, these migrants came in more balanced proportions from bordering Guatemalan departments (52 percent) and non-bordering (46 percent). In terms of origins and destinies, it allows noticing differential migratory circuits among transborder workers and international Guatemalan migrants.

Among the long distance migratory flows, the participation of Chiapas people in destinies such as the northern Mexican border and U. S. has increased in recent years. The Survey on migration in the northern border of Mexico (EMIF-Norte) allows knowing the evolution of their participation in three flows: that which moves from the interior of the country having Mexico's northern border or the U. S. as a destiny (called south originated flow in the survey), those people who return voluntarily from that country, or, from the Mexican northern border to their original states in Mexico and those who were taken back by the U. S. migratory authorities. For the purpose of this project, we explore the participation of Chiapas people into two of those flows, examining their increasing contribution to the whole.

After grouping the annual phases of the survey between 1993 and 2006, and after establishing simple mobile averages of three kind, graph 1 allows appreciating the participation of emigrants coming from the south that move heading for the Mexican northern border or for the U. S., and comparing the behavior of three

³ The survey defines "south originated flow" as people older than 12 years of age who were not born in the U. S. and who do not reside in the bordering towns or in the U. S., and that arrive to the bordering towns where the survey is performed without a promised date of return and whose stay is based on work reasons, change of residence or in transit towards the north, or, due to study reasons, holidays or visiting family or friends.

GRAPH 1
THIRD ORDER CENTERED SIMPLE MOBILE MEAN OF THE FLOW OF MIGRANTS FROM THE SOUTH,
ACCORDING TO RESIDENCE STATUS. EMIF 1993-2006



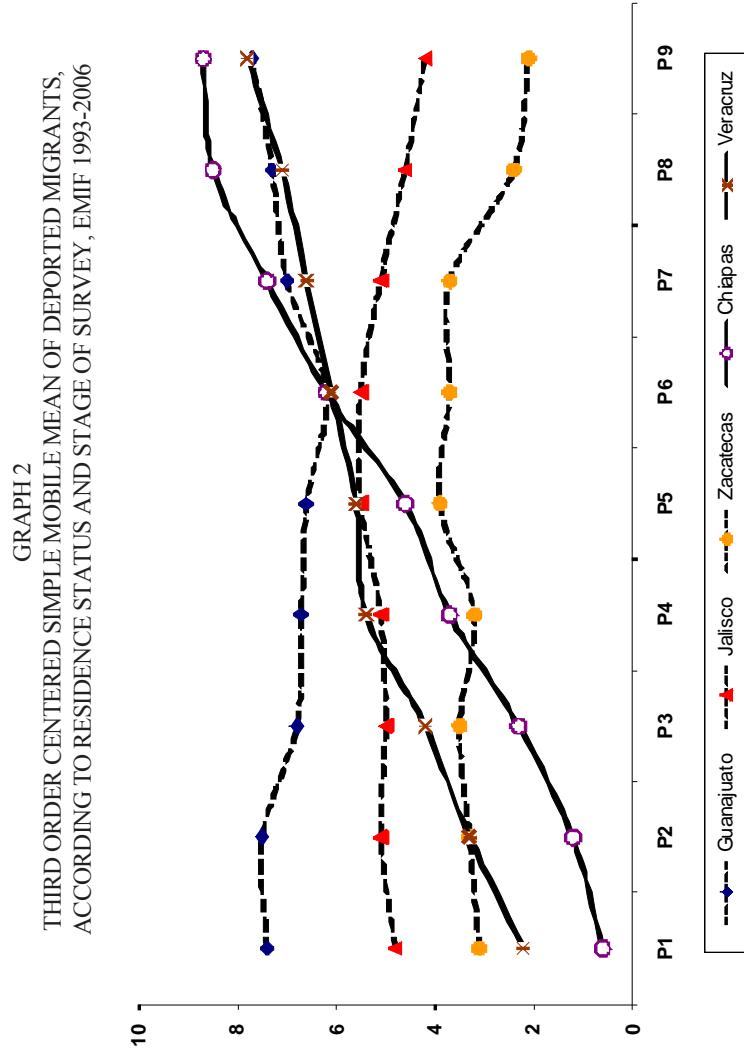
Source: EMIF.

states with a known and long tradition with regard to international migrants that travel to the neighboring country of the north, Guanajuato, Jalisco and Zacatecas, with other two with new participation: Chiapas and Veracruz.

Graph 1 shows that from the beginning of the performance of the survey and in the first five years of its annual phases carried out between 1993-98, migrants coming from Guanajuato, Jalisco and Zacatecas who moved through the northern border having as destiny that region or the U. S. experienced a progressive fall in their contribution to the flow of emigrants, despite the fact that Guanajuato recovered its contribution in recent and later years to 2001. The fall of the participation of those states could be related to the increase of the bordering surveillance that the U. S. government displayed in their border with Mexico aiming at discouraging and making difficult the non-documented entrance, and that started in 1993 and that was extended in subsequent years along the whole border.

Information spread through social networks of residents in communities with long migratory tradition allows their migrants (experienced and inexperienced) to undertake and develop alternative strategies in view of the new obstacles established for their mobility (Anguiano and Trejo, 2007); among them, to avoid recurrent annual entrances and returns and to shorten the time of their stay in the origin or destiny. Therefore migratory movements decrease and, consequently, the participation of these states in the migratory flows that the EMIF-North records are reduced in their proportions.

Conversely, the behavior and increasing participation of two states of very recent incorporation to these long-distance flows is striking, it was directed both towards the northern border and to the U. S., and it is particularly striking considering that it took place in conditions in which the entrance to the neighboring country on the north was being progressively hindered. Veracruz and Chiapas show a gradually increasing participation in the first phases and accelerated and expansive in the last ones. In both cases it is remarkable that it is precisely from 2001 when their contribution increases suddenly. Putting forward a pair of hypothesis on this behavior, on the one hand I would postulate that the higher proportion of these emigrants from Veracruz and Chiapas headed for the northern border, on the other, that those who headed for the U. S. responded to, and at the same time revealed, new ways of focused recruitment that was displayed in towns, states and regions that expel migrants of recent integration to that international flow.



Similarly, graph 2 allows examining the behavior of the flow of migrants without documents and returned by the U. S. authorities. We can assert that it is a set of international migrants that did not have success, since they were arrested and sent back by the Border Patrol. In a first instance, we can observe that the three states of long migration tradition keep proportions that are slightly variable with tendency to drop in the registers of the last phases in the cases of Jalisco and Zacatecas. This means that these three states continue maintaining their contribution to the international migratory flow, even among non-authorized migrants and returned ones.

On their side, Veracruz and Chiapas show noticeable rises in their participation in the flow of returned emigrants. It is striking that in the last three registers, it was precisely Chiapas the state that provided more proportion to the set of these five selected states, a fact that indicates that their population is increasingly being integrated to the international emigration, but that their migrants are less successful when trying to enter without documents and trying to remain in the neighboring country. Among the migrants who in recent years have experienced greater tragedies attempting to cross the U.S. border in a harbored or surreptitious way, Chiapas people have the first place.

According to the Voluntary Repatriation Program implemented by the Mexican and U. S. governments in 2004 in the Sonora-Arizona desert border, Chiapas people have the first place among migrants that are rescued and returned to Mexico, only outnumbered by those from Veracruz and Puebla, and added to other migrants that come from the states of Mexico, Guerrero, Oaxaca and Michoacan.

Final reflections

In terms of territory, for more than a century Chiapas has been part of the Mexican southern border that adjoins with the Guatemalan border and, by extension, with Central America. As a bordering territory of the south of the country and strategic economic area given its exploitation of natural resources, Chiapas has hosted the development of labor markets that employ native, internal and international immigrants. The unequal distribution of income that prevails in the state, which makes it have one of the first positions in the country in terms of economic and social marginalization, has not prevented the fact that in order to exploit its natural resources and to develop its economic activities workers are required in its agricultural, livestock and forest farms, in its limited but strategic

hydroelectric industry and in its commercial and service sectors, especially the touristic. Despite that, employment has not been created in sufficient amounts and quality and in an adequate manner for Chiapas people to remain in the state, since in recent years its migratory movements, traditionally of short distance inside the state, have expanded and increased to more distant destinies, among them, to the touristic spaces of the Yucatan Peninsula, the bordering urban towns of the north of México and even, and increasingly, to the U. S.

The systematized information in this project allow us to postulate that in recent years – just as it occurs in the country as a whole, but possibly with higher intensity and speed –, Chiapas is being constituted as an immigration, emigration and migratory transit territory. This condition creates important challenges for public policies, especially for the population policy in its migratory and labor aspects, both for the country and the state and, consequently, in challenges and tasks for intergovernmental cooperation.

As a territory with intense transborder mobility, Chiapas faces the challenge of taking part in the management and regulation that the Mexican State aims to establish through the National Institute of Migration from their Comprehensive Proposal on Migratory Policy in the Southern Border, which considers regulations to attend and incorporate in a legal, safe and orderly way the labor flows, mainly from Guatemalans and from other Central Americans that arrive to the state, recognizing their contribution both for the Chiapas' economy and society, as well as for the country as a whole, acting accordingly with respect to their labor and human rights.

With regard to the emigration of its inhabitants, the challenge is on two sides. On the one hand, the creation of worthy employment and in quantities and qualities that allow to employ its population in its territory, and to consider the emigration as one more of the possible options of employment and not as an extreme imperative for the survival and much less the only one, last and most difficult option; on the other hand, to imagine, create and develop a migratory policy to support those who decide to emigrate, both to the interior of the country and abroad. Both challenges are also for Mexico as a country.

Finally, as a territory of national and foreign immigration, in Chiapas – as well as in the whole country – the respect for cultural diversity, another asset of its ancient population, continues being a challenge, even more in a world in which homogenization of ideas and culture caused by that which George Ritzer calls “the McDonalization of Society” leads in a wrong way towards the elimination of that diversity and denies obtusely the possibilities of multiethnic societies, such as those that exist in Chiapas and Mexico as a whole.

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Chiapas: immigration, migration and migratory transit territory / M. Anguiano

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