

**Immigrant Workers Contribution to GDP
in High-Immigration Countries in Latin America**
**Contribución de los trabajadores inmigrantes al PIB
en países de alta inmigración en América Latina**

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an estimate of the contribution of immigrant laborers to sustaining economic dynamics in six high-immigration countries in Latin America. To estimate gross domestic product (GDP) by migratory origin of workforce, we rely on the method developed by Canales (2022), which has been recently used by the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) in its *2023 Social Panorama of Latin America and the Caribbean*. The results indicate the growing role of immigrants in maintaining economic dynamics (GDP volume and growth) in these countries over the last two decades. This contribution takes on particular relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the subsequent economic recovery experienced in recent years, a period in which immigrant workers played a leading role in maintaining the functioning and dynamism of national economies.

Keywords: 1. migration and development, 2. economic growth, 3. contributions of migration, 4. Latin America, 5. labor migration.

RESUMEN

En este texto se presenta una estimación del aporte de los inmigrantes laborales al sostenimiento de la dinámica económica en seis países de alta inmigración en América Latina. Para estimar el producto interno bruto (PIB), según origen migratorio de la fuerza de trabajo, se empleó el método de Canales (2022), el cual ha sido usado recientemente por la Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Cepal) en el *Panorama Social de América Latina y el Caribe de 2023*. Los resultados indican el creciente papel de los inmigrantes en mantener la dinámica económica (volumen y crecimiento del PIB) de estos países en las últimas dos décadas. Este aporte adquiere particular relevancia durante la crisis de la pandemia de COVID-19 y la posterior recuperación económica experimentada en años recientes, período en el que los trabajadores inmigrantes tuvieron un rol protagónico para mantener el funcionamiento y dinamismo de las economías nacionales.

Palabras clave: 1. migración y desarrollo. 2. crecimiento económico. 3. contribuciones de la migración, 4. América Latina, 5. migración laboral.

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INTRODUCTION

International migration is one of the core issues of contemporary society. Since the end of the last century, it has ceased to be a subject of mere academic interest and has become one of the main topics of political debate worldwide. For the governments involved, as well as for supranational organizations, multilateral institutions, and international cooperation agencies, migration is now part of their social and political agendas (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2023; International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2020).

It is in this scenario that an anti-migrant discourse has tended to predominate in recent decades, accusing migrants, among other things, of generating a climate of societal and public insecurity, of being an excessive burden on the public budget in areas such as health, housing, education, and transportation, as well as of creating unfair competition in the labor market by causing wage reduction and displacing local workers (Cociña, 2020; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2019; Oroza & Fraga, 2015).

In Latin America, the debate surrounding migration is also being dominated by this growing wave of discontent, in which migrants constitute the chosen subject for expressing and disseminating views of intolerance and attitudes of discrimination and xenophobia (Ferrajoli, 2019; Ramírez, 2020). It remains paradoxical that in several Latin American countries, as well as in advanced societies, a form of institutional racism is incubating, using democracy and its institutions to sustain a discourse and practices of intolerance and hatred toward immigrants (Arabi, 2020; Tijoux, 2016).

It is the “stigmatization of the migrant as human merchandise” (Delgado et al., 2009, p. 43) that contributes to their devaluation as a person and subject of rights, by this means enhancing the effectiveness of that discourse which seeks to blame migrants for the most diverse ills of society. Thus, “the dominant idea that there is a crisis is often accepted not only because the economic system is being restructured by marginalizing entire social sectors, but also because there would be illegitimate populations in society whose mere presence prevents any possible improvement” (Naïr, 2006, p. 15).

This stigmatized view of immigration has led to alarmist discourses that have in turn ideologized the public debate and undervalued the objective analysis of facts based on empirical data and statistics that account for the social and economic causes and consequences involved in migration processes (Ajzenman et al., 2021). This ideologized construction of migration, which emphasizes the potential social, political, and cultural problems it would generate, nevertheless obscures the contributions that immigrants make to host societies —contributions not only economic, but also in demographic, social, and cultural terms (Canales & Martínez, 2024; Delgado & Gaspar, 2012; Martínez & Cano, 2022; OECD Development Centre and International Labour Organization [OECD/ILO], 2018).

Considering the above, the central objective of this paper is to present an estimate of the immigrant contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) in six Latin American countries with

high immigration rates (Chile, Ecuador, Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic). To this end, a method of GDP decomposition was employed, based on official statistics from national accounts published by each country's central bank, as well as national household surveys conducted by the national statistical institutes of those same countries.

This analysis intends to help demystify anti-immigrant rhetoric that, based on racist and xenophobic prejudices, stigmatizes migration and places migrant groups in a highly vulnerable social position, exposing them to potential attacks and aggression, as has already taken place in some localities and countries of the region.

ON THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF MIGRANTS IN DESTINATION SOCIETIES

International migration has always been viewed as an essentially labor-related process. Migrants are not only people, but also workers. Various approaches and theories have been developed in this regard. These range from dual markets and labor market segmentation theories (Pioré, 1979), to approaches that understand migration as foundational for international labor markets (Bustamante, 1975), as well as theories concerning the role of migration in the formation of working classes in advanced societies (Castles & Kosack, 1984), and also neoclassical approaches to migration (Borjas, 2001; Canales, 2017), and to the role of labor migration in economic globalization processes (Sassen, 2007).

Still, in all these approaches, the question of migrants' contributions is subsumed within the interest in explaining the phenomenon itself. It is only recently that the question of contributions has gained relevance and become a way of approaching the analysis of migration. In Latin America, at least three perspectives have been identified from which this issue has been addressed.

First, from the perspective of political economy, Delgado-Wise (2021), Glick Schiller (2022), and Canales (2021) have framed contemporary migrations as a mechanism for transferring labor from peripheral economies to areas of development and capitalist expansion, both in advanced societies and in export enclaves in peripheral countries, or directly in emerging economies. This approach seeks to highlight the role of migration in capital accumulation processes in receiving societies.

Migrants are *pulled* not only by the prevailing conditions of development, well-being, and social protection in destination societies, but also by their labor and economic function on two levels: *a)* on the productive level, migrant workers support processes of capital accumulation (Veloso et al., 2023), and *b)* on the reproductive level, migrant workers contribute to sustaining the social reproduction of the middle and upper classes in these host societies. In light of this, migration constitutes a manifestation of unequal development relations, both on an economic-productive level (capital accumulation) and on a societal level, contributing to the formation of a globalized class inequality structure (Canales, 2021; Márquez, 2021).

Second, from the perspective of political demography, the contributions of migration to sustaining the demographic reproduction of populations in destination societies are analyzed

(Canales, 2025). International migration establishes a global system of demographic reproduction based on the complementarity of population dynamics in regions of origin (developing countries) with those in destination countries (developed societies). In countries of origin, the demographic dividend generates a surplus of the working-age population. In receiving countries, in turn, aging and declining birth and fertility rates create gaps and deficits in the working-age population. These two systems complement each other, and are through migration integrated into a global system of demographic reproduction. The corollary is that, in advanced societies receiving migrants, this global system of reproduction manifests as a process of eventual demographic replacement, which has led to these movements being termed *replacement migrations* (United Nations, 2001).

This approach, initially formulated for the analysis of migration in advanced societies, has also been used to analyze migration in peripheral countries with high immigration rates, such as Costa Rica (Reboiras, 2015).

Finally, by extending the gender perspective, migration studies have focused on the role of migration in shaping a transnational care industry (López et al., 2022). Recent studies on the labor market integration of migrants, both in Europe and Latin America, have documented their growing role in various economic activities geared toward the social and daily reproduction of the native population of destination countries, particularly those in the middle and upper social strata (Canales, 2014; González Torralbo, 2013; Herrera, 2020). This refers to jobs such as domestic service, the care and support industry for vulnerable groups (the elderly, children, the sick, among others), maintenance and cleaning work, as well as many other personal services (food preparation, restaurants, gardening, among many others).

These are diverse occupations within what has been called proximity services, or services for the reproduction of daily life for individuals and families, especially in their domestic sphere (Parella, 2003). The most paradigmatic case, but not the only one, is that of domestic service. Many other activities and occupations have proliferated, focused on the care of the sick, of children, and of the elderly, on food preparation, cleaning and maintenance, among many others (Guizardi et al., 2018; Hondageneu-Sotelo, 2007; Oso & Suárez-Grimalt, 2017).

Although these three approaches appear to be independent of each other (political economy, political demography, and gender studies), they are in fact three planes from which the issue of contributions can be analyzed and which can be easily linked. Thus, for example, the issue of care work is not foreign to the political economy approach. As a matter of fact, structuralist feminist perspectives argue that:

wage labor could not exist without domestic work, childcare, education, emotional care, and a range of other activities that help produce new generations of workers and replenish existing ones, as well as maintain social bonds and shared understandings. Alike ‘original accumulation’, social reproduction is an indispensable condition for the possibility of capitalist production (Fraser, 2014, p. 61).

Likewise, from a political demography perspective, the issue pertains to how the demographic imbalances and disparities generated by changes in population structures translate into labor markets as imbalances between a growing demand for workers —generated by the mode of accumulation and economic growth in developed countries— and the stagnation of the native labor supply that local demographics are capable of producing, given population aging and low birth rates, which imply a stagnation of the working-age population. This results in a chronic labor shortage that must be covered by international immigrants.

MIGRANT CONTRIBUTION. A REVIEW FROM LATIN AMERICA

Contributions are often understood as the input of a group to a social process, whether it be well-being or development. From a sociological perspective, the issue is somewhat more complex. Contributions refer to a mechanism through which different social groups interact with each other, establishing links and relationships of social inequality among individuals, classes, genders, races, and social and economic actors in general. In the case of migrants, their contributions are the way in which they become an essential component in the formation and constitution of destination societies, both on an economic-labor, as well as a demographic and societal level (Canales & Martínez, 2024).

From this angle, the contributions of migrants can be understood as transcending a utilitarian cost-benefit logic. It is not only that receiving societies benefit from immigration and obtain achievements, resources, and capital that would otherwise be much more costly, but also that, through their contributions, migrants cease to be an external actor in society and become an intrinsic one. As such, acknowledging their contributions is a first step toward recognizing migrants as social actors within society and, consequently, as social subjects with full rights.

This way, the question is from which levels of society can these contributions be analyzed and measured. McAuliffe et al. (2019) identified three categories of contributions: sociocultural, civic-political, and economic. For his part, Canales (2021) points to three areas of societal constitution where the contributions of migration are currently fundamental: demographic reproduction, social and class reproduction, and economic reproduction and capital accumulation.

Reviewing the notion of migrant contributions, a recent ECLAC study (Martínez & Cano, 2022) analyzes and estimates the contributions of migration in four Latin American countries: Chile, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Peru. The study proposes an analysis that accounts for these contributions not only from their structural dimension, quantifying demographic, labor, and economic contributions, but also as components of the constitution and formation of society from its subjective dimensions. These subjective dimensions produce and reproduce perceptions and, in general, modes of self-representation of all population groups as distinct actors within a single society.

Thus, the study combines an analysis and quantitative estimations of migrant contributions in these four countries with an analysis of the subjectivities constructed through migration, where forms of representation, social ties, and power dynamics between local actors and migrants are

reproduced. Also, returning to McAuliffe's proposal on the cultural and civic-political impacts of migrants, the question is how, through migration, collective imaginaries and ideas and self-representations as nations and cultures are reconstructed.

Moreover, in 2018, the OECD/ILO Development Centre (OECD/ILO, 2018) published a study on how migrants contribute to the economy in ten developing countries.² By means of quantitative methods, they estimated the contribution of migrants in three areas: labor markets, economic growth, and public finances.

As for the labor market, the study confirms that migrants tend to have higher rates of participation in economic activity than the native population, for both men and women. This situation, however, does not represent a potential displacement of native labor by migrant work: on the contrary, as other studies indicate (Gil & Domingo, 2006; Sánchez & Serra, 2017), this represents a form of complementarity, where migrant workers fill the demographic gaps left by the aging population, while also often finding employment in low-productivity, low-wage, and highly precarious jobs, where their very status as migrants becomes a form of exploitation and precarious working conditions.

As for contribution to GDP, the OECD/ILO study found that the contribution of migrants to GDP growth is usually greater than their workforce proportion. This situation arises because the growth rate of the migrant workforce is typically higher than that of the natives. Thus, migrant contribution to GDP and its growth are based less on the productivity levels of migrant workers than on the overall growth of the migrant workforce in each country.

Along the same lines of analysis, Cruz and Vargas (2018), using an extension of Canales' (2022) model, estimated the GDP generated by the migrant workforce in the Dominican Republic's economy. This model is based on average productivities, which these authors further broke down at the regional level. Based on this method, they estimated that, at the national level, migrant workers contributed 9.54% to added value in 2017. They also estimated that this contribution reached 28% in the agricultural sector and 29% in construction, both sectors with a high concentration of Haitian labor, the main migrant group in the Dominican Republic.

Finally, the OECD/ILO study (2018) points out that migrants are not only a source of labor but also consumers and, as such, contribute to public finances through taxation on the sale of goods and services (primarily VAT). Although the calculations are not conclusive, it is generally estimated that this form of taxation of migrants tends to be greater than, or at least very similar to, their public spending in health, education, and other public services.

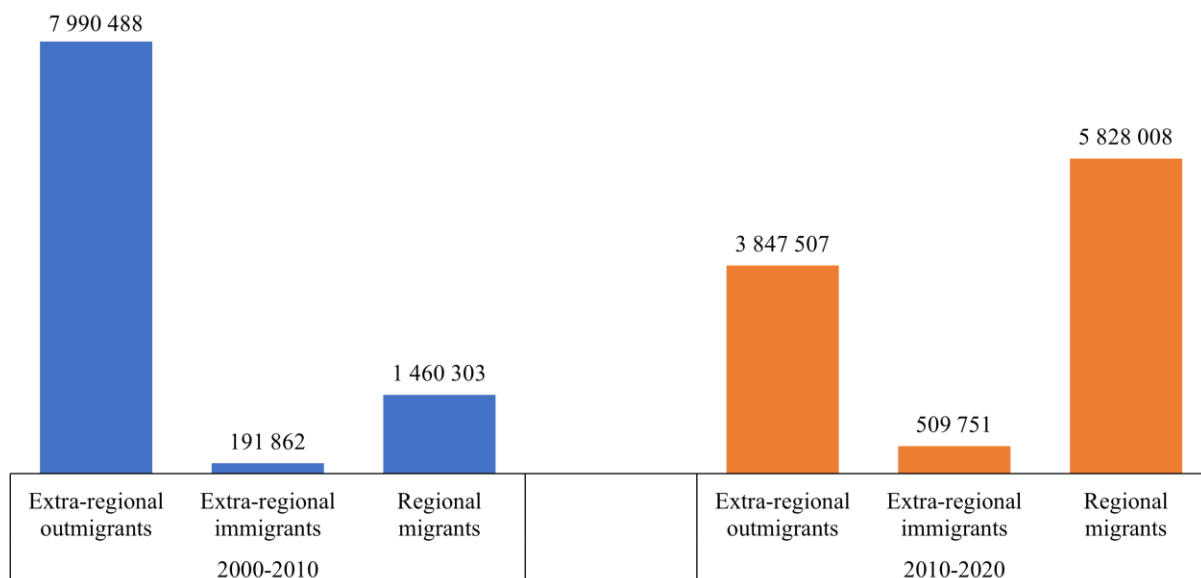
² Argentina, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic in Latin America; Ivory Coast, Ghana, Rwanda, and South Africa in Africa; and Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, and Thailand in Asia.

THE NEW MIGRATION SCENARIO IN LATIN AMERICA

The migration scenario in Latin America has transformed substantially in the last 15 years. Until approximately 2010, emigration to other regions of the world predominated, especially to the United States, and to Europe to a lesser extent. From then on, this flow has decreased, mainly due to the slowdown in Mexican emigration to the United States (Galindo, 2015); conversely, intra-regional migration has increased, both due to the surge in Venezuelan migration (Freitez & Marotta, 2021; Osorio & Phélan, 2019) and to the rise of other regional flows, especially between countries that share borders (Baeninger & Canales, 2018; Stefoni, 2018).

As shown in Figure 1, extra-regional emigration constituted the main type of displacement until the first decade of this century. The number of Latin American immigrants residing in the United States and Europe increased by almost 8 million people in that decade, while within Latin American countries, the number of immigrants from other countries in the region increased by only 1.46 million people. By contrast, in the following decade (2010-2020), it is estimated that extra-regional emigration decreased to 3.85 million people, while intra-regional migration increased to 5.8 million people.³

Figure 1. Latin America: Changes in Migration Stocks by Origin and Regional Destination, Periods 2000-2010 and 2010-2020



Source: Own elaboration based on United Nations (2020).

This new migration model manifests itself differently at the national level, generating diverse national migration patterns depending on how the three main flows that comprise it are combined: extra-regional emigration, intra-regional immigration, and intra-regional emigration. In this

³ Extra-regional immigration, which was a central component until the mid-20th century, is now practically insignificant.

regard, Latin American countries have been classified into five broad migration categories, namely:

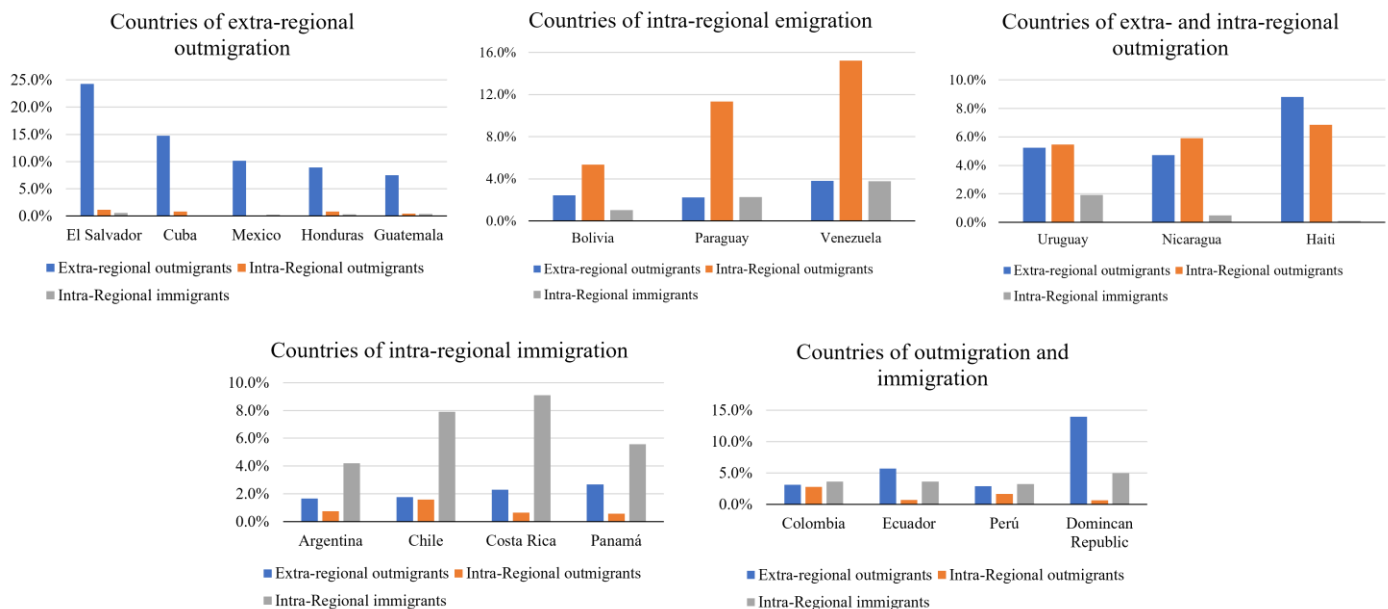
- Countries with high extra-regional outmigration. This category includes the northern Central American countries (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador), Cuba, and Mexico. They also share the characteristic that their emigration is almost exclusively to the United States.
- Countries with intra-regional outmigration. This category includes Bolivia, Paraguay, and, more recently, Venezuela. Paraguay concentrates its emigration in Argentina, while Bolivia also in Chile. The case of Venezuela is somewhat different. The numbers and rates are much higher, and the destinations more diverse. In 2020, the United Nations (United Nations, 2020) estimated a total of 4.33 million Venezuelans residing in Latin American countries. Of these, 41% are in Colombia, 22% in Peru, and another 21% are distributed almost equally between Chile and Ecuador.
- Countries with both extra- and intra-regional outmigration. This category includes Nicaragua, Haiti, and Uruguay. The first two show a similar pattern, that is, significant emigration to the United States with equally significant emigration to a neighboring country: Costa Rica in the case of Nicaragua, and the Dominican Republic in the case of Haiti.
- Countries that are both countries of origin for extra-regional outmigration and destination countries for regional migration flows. The Dominican Republic stands out, as it receives Haitian migration and is also a country of origin for a significant migration flow to the United States. Meanwhile, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, traditionally countries of emigration, have become in recent years destination countries for significant flows of Venezuelans, representing a novel situation and set of challenges regarding migration in these three countries.
- Countries with high intra-regional immigration. Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, and Panama fall into this category. Argentina has always been a destination country for regional migration flows. In Chile, this trend began in the 1990s with Peruvian migrants, and solidified in the 2000s with influxes from Colombia, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.
- The arrival of large contingents of Venezuelans in recent years has also influenced the situation. By 2020, they constituted 33% of regional immigrants, a proportion that has increased to 40% in recent years. Costa Rica, for its part, is a destination for the new Nicaraguan migration, which, starting in the 1990s, redirected the flow from the United States to Costa Rica. Finally, Panama is a special case, as it has always been a destination country for various migration flows pulled by the economic boom brought about by the Panama Canal.

- Finally, the case of Brazil stands out; while the country attracts significant migration flows from across the region, the weight of international migration is very small in relative terms, given the Brazil's population size. Nevertheless, it presents a particular migration challenge related to the importance of flows in border regions and territories (Baeninger & Canales, 2018).

Based on this typology, the analysis of migration contributions can be differentiated according to the nature of migration in each country. In countries with high emigration, for example, the emphasis should be placed on two levels: first, on the impact of remittances on national economies and the well-being of recipient households, and second, on the economic and social impact of return migration.

In countries with high immigration, conversely, the emphasis should be placed, on the one hand, on the contributions of migration to the labor market and to specific activities and occupations, and on the other hand, on the contribution of migration to GDP generation and economic growth in these countries (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Latin America, 19 Countries.
Classification of Countries According to Their Migration Pattern



Source: Own elaboration based on United Nations (2020).

Here we focus on the contribution of immigrants to GDP in six countries with high or medium levels of immigration: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic.

ON THE METHOD FOR ESTIMATING THE ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF MIGRANTS

Intraregional migration in Latin America is of a distinctly labor-related nature. Migrants are not merely people, but also workers —people of working age who move across borders for employment reasons. As a workforce, migrants contribute to the development of the productive forces of their destination countries and, in doing so, boost their economic and productive activity. As such, it becomes necessary to quantitatively estimate this contribution of migrants to each country's GDP, and thus to support the economic growth of these countries, which is the foundation of social development in every society.

No single source of information that directly records this contribution of migrants to GDP is available, however. To calculate this, indirect estimates must be used, allowing for the breakdown of total GDP according to certain sociodemographic characteristics of the workforce that generates it; in this case, based on the migratory origin of employed workers.

To this end, the methodology proposed by Canales (2022) was employed. Based on an economic-mathematical model, this methodology allows for the breakdown of total GDP according to the specific contribution of each workforce category. In this model, the GDP breakdown is based on an algorithm that combines, on the one hand, the composition of the employed population according to sectors of economic activity and ethnic-migratory status, as recorded in national household surveys and/or population censuses, and, on the other hand, the composition of GDP by economic sectors reported in the national accounts published annually by each country's central bank.

The assumption underlying this GDP decomposition model is that, at high levels of disaggregation of economic activity, it becomes possible to assume that average labor productivity does not differ significantly based on the worker's ethnic or migratory background. It can thus be assumed, for example, that the productivity of a construction worker is practically the same, regardless of their ethnic or migratory background, since what matters are the technical and productive conditions under which each construction worker performs their job. The same can be said for workers in cleaning and maintenance services, or in a textile factory, or in mining, agriculture, and agribusiness, and so on in other branches and sectors of economic activity.

According to this mathematical model, the GDP generated by each migratory category that makes up the entire employed workforce (both migrants and natives) can be calculated based on the following equation:

$$GDPLj = \sum_{i=1}^n APrSi * LjSi$$

Where

GDPLj is the Gross Domestic Product generated by migratory category *j* of the workforce.

$APrSi$ is the average product per worker in economic sector i .

$LjSi$ is the number of workers of migratory category j employed in sector i of activity.

This model was used by ECLAC in its *2023 Social Panorama of Latin America* to estimate the contribution of migrants to the economic dynamics of various Latin American countries (ECLAC, 2023). Similarly, Cruz and Vargas (2018) and Gratereaux and Lizardo (2012) have made similar estimates for the Dominican Republic, by means of some variations of this same economic-mathematical model.

In this study, this model was used to estimate the value of GDP generated by immigrants in the six countries selected: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic. For each country, a methodological process was undertaken to standardize the categories of GDP disaggregation by sector and branch of activity recorded by each central bank, with the categories of worker employment disaggregation by sector and branch of activity reported by the national household surveys of those same countries.

Before presenting the results of this exercise, some methodological clarifications should be made that must be taken into account when analyzing the estimates obtained. In particular, the contribution of migrants to GDP and economic growth is conditioned by the two fundamental components of the algorithm that sustains the method used.

On the one hand, by the dynamics of migration itself (absolute volumes and relative weights), and its trend during the period under analysis. In contexts of increased migration, typically associated with periods of economic expansion, the contribution of migrants is usually positive and significant. However, in contexts of stagnant immigration, such as in Argentina and Costa Rica over the last decade, while contributions to GDP remain, their contribution to economic growth is substantially reduced.

On the other hand, the contribution to GDP depends on the relative productivity levels of migrants compared to the local workforce. This depends less on the worker themselves than on the labor market segmentation patterns in each country, which condition their labor market integration. It is common for migrants to become segregated in low-productivity activities, which diminishes their productive potential and, consequently, their eventual contribution to GDP and economic growth.

The economic context should be accounted for in top of the above; that is, whether the country is experiencing an expansionary or a recessionary cycle. In the former case (as was the situation in most countries until 2019), the very expansion of the economy acts as pull factor for immigrants, which enhances their contribution to sustaining that economic growth. In the second case, during periods of economic stagnation, such as the one Argentina has experienced over the last 10 years, or during times of crisis and GDP decline, as was the case worldwide following the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic contribution of migrants will depend on how migration and labor market

dynamics react in these contexts of crisis and stagnation. In any case, the pandemic scenario provides a suitable framework for analyzing the contributions of migration in these contexts of economic crisis. As will be seen, there is no single or uniform trend; it rather depends on an interplay of factors.

In view of the above, the analysis has been organized around these two contextual aspects.

MIGRANT CONTRIBUTION TO GDP
IN SIX LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES

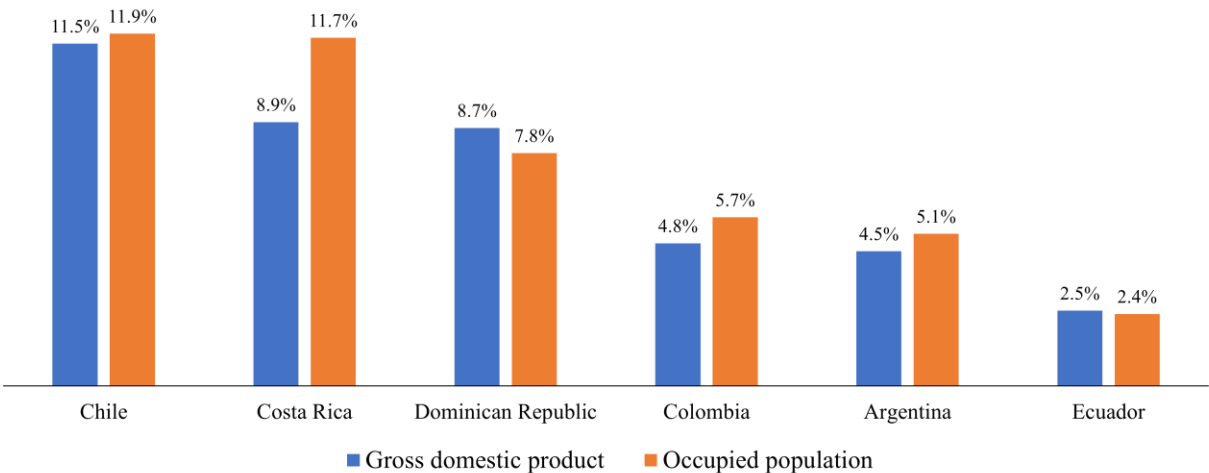
The contribution of migrants to GDP is directly associated with the proportion of labor migrants among the employed population. Three situations can be identified.

First, there is the case of Chile, and to a lesser extent those of Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic, where migrants make a significant productive contribution, accounting for 11.5%, 8.9%, and 8.7% of GDP in 2022, respectively. In these three countries, labor migration represents similar proportions of the employed workforce, and they stand out for being countries with high levels of regional immigration.

Then we have the cases of Colombia and Argentina, where this productive contribution falls to only 4.8% and 4.5% of GDP, respectively, which is consistent with the specific weight of immigration in the workforce in both countries.

Finally, the case of Ecuador, where labor migration is very low, is also reflected in a low economic contribution, generating only 2.5% of GDP in 2022 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Contribution of migrants to GDP and employment (% of the employed population) in six Latin American countries, 2022



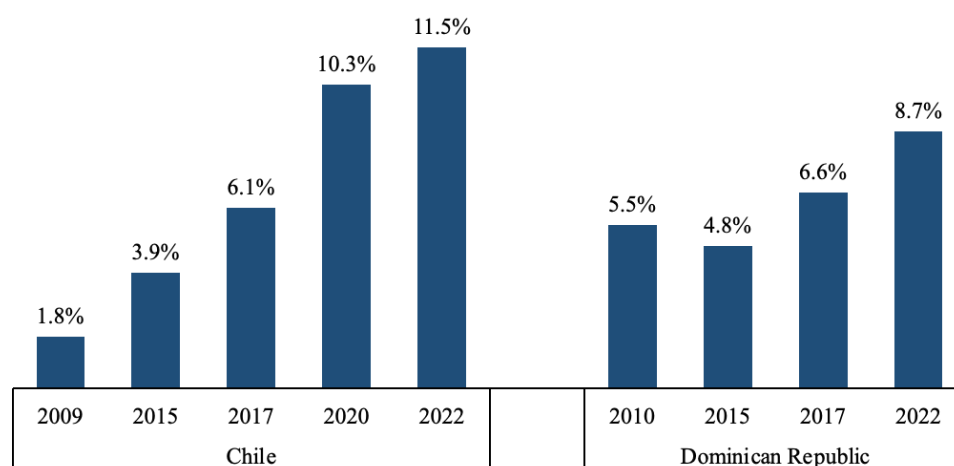
Source: Own estimates; based on, in Chile: Social Development and Family Ministry (2022); Central Bank of Chile (2025); Argentina: National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC, for its acronym in Spanish) (2022 and 2025); Costa Rica: National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC, for its acronym in Spanish) (2022); Central Bank of Costa Rica (2024); Dominican Republic: National Statistics Office

(ONE, for its acronym in Spanish) (2022); Central Bank of the Dominican Republic (2025); Colombia: National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, for its acronym in Spanish) (2025 and 2022); Ecuador: National Institute of Statistics and Census of the Republic of Ecuador (2022); Central Bank of Ecuador (2025); and ECLAC (2025).

A second aspect to consider is the trend in the contribution of migrant workers to GDP in each country. Three situations were identified in this regard. First, countries where this contribution is significant and increasing. Second, countries where the contribution is less significant but also increasing. Third, countries where the contribution of migrants has remained stable.⁴

The first group includes the cases of Chile and the Dominican Republic. In both instances, the contribution of migrants, in addition to being significant, shows a growing trend. In Chile, the contribution of migrants to GDP increased from less than 2% until 2011 to 6.1% in 2017 and 11.5% in 2022. In the Dominican Republic, although the growth rate is slower, it remains significant, rising from 5.5% of GDP in 2010 to 8.7% in 2022 (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Contribution of Migrants to GDP in Chile and the Dominican Republic

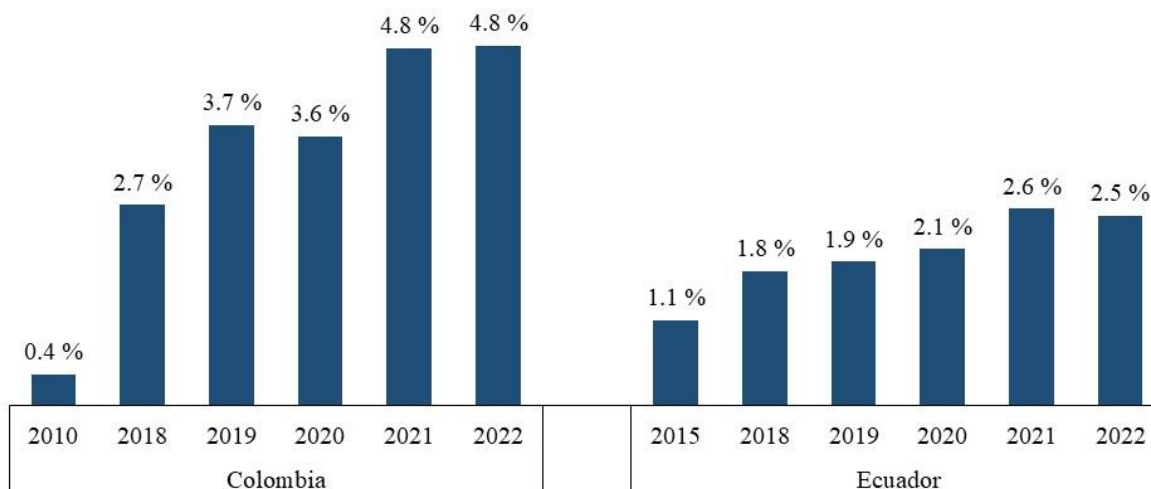


Source: Own estimates; based on, in Chile: Social Development and Family Ministry (2022, 2020, 2017, 2015, and 2009); Central Bank of Chile (2025); Dominican Republic: ONE (2010, 2015, 2017, and 2022); Central Bank of the Dominican Republic (2025); and ECLAC (2025).

Ecuador and Colombia also show a growing trend in the contribution of migrants to national GDP, but at a lower level than the countries mentioned previously. Migration in Colombia was very low in 2010, generating only 0.4% of national GDP. However, with the increasing influx of Venezuelans since the second half of the 2010s, the contribution of migrants to GDP has risen to 2.1% in 2018 and up to 4.8% in 2022. Similarly, in Ecuador, the contribution of migrants to GDP has increased from only 1.1% in 2015 to 2.1% in 2020, and to 2.5% in 2022 (Figure 5).

⁴ In all cases, GDP figures have been deflated to correct for the effect of inflation.

Figure 5. Contribution of Migrants to GDP in Colombia and Ecuador



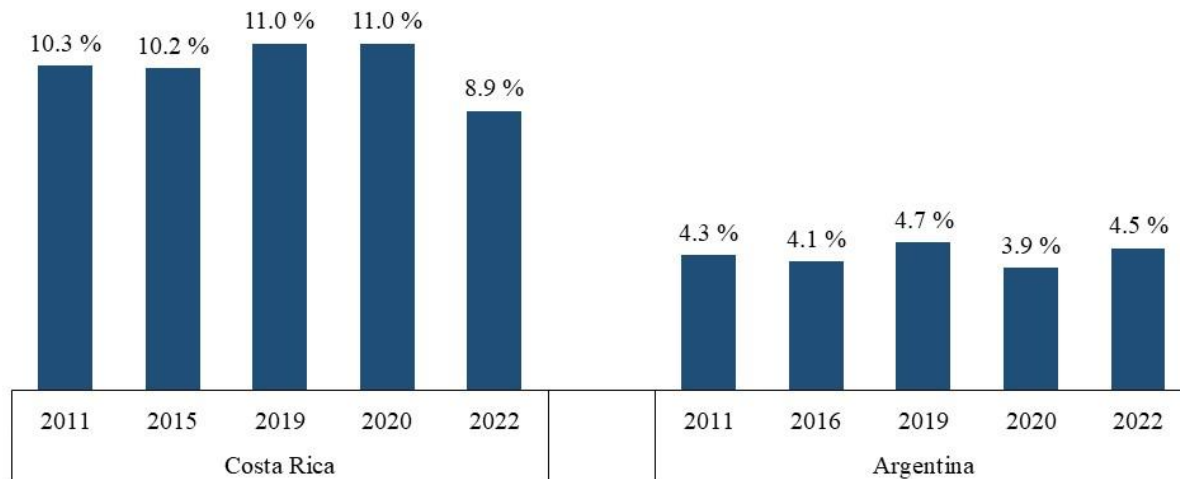
Source: Own estimates; based on, in Colombia: DANE (2010, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2025); Ecuador: National Institute of Statistics and Census of the Republic of Ecuador (2015, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022); Central Bank of Ecuador (2025); and ECLAC (2025).

One aspect to consider in regard to Chile, Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Ecuador is that this trend of increased economic contribution from migrants is primarily associated with a similarly growing trend in labor migration to these countries. This situation contrasts with the other two cases analyzed.

Although Argentina and Costa Rica are countries with a significant migration tradition, immigration there has remained relatively stable, or has grown very slowly over the last decade. This could explain why the contribution of migrants to GDP has also remained relatively stable.

During the 2010s and until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the contribution of migrants to the GDP of Costa Rica fluctuated between 10% and 11%, falling then to 8.9% in 2022. The situation in Argentina is similar, but at a lower scale. In this case, between 2013 and 2022, the contribution of migrants to GDP fluctuated between 3.9% and 4.7% (Figure 6).⁵

⁵ This smaller contribution in Argentina can be explained by a methodological factor. The Permanent Household Survey, from which these calculations are derived, tends to underestimate the total number of immigrants in Argentina.

Figure 6. Contribution of Migrants to GDP in Costa Rica and Argentina

Source: Own estimates; based on, in Costa Rica: INEC (2011, 2015, 2019, 2022, and 2025); Central Bank of Costa Rica (2024); Argentina: INDEC (2011, 2016, 2019, 2020, 2022, and 2025); and ECLAC (2025).

Beyond the differences in scale, it is noteworthy that both countries share the same trend; however, this is due to very different factors. While in Argentina this trend is linked to a long cycle of economic stagnation, in which the national GDP has barely grown in the last 10 years, in Costa Rica it is part of a cycle of economic expansion, which appears to be based on capital-intensive processes that demand less labor and, therefore, do not create space for increased labor migration. Indeed, between 2011 and 2022, while GDP grew by 42% over the entire period, employment only grew by 6%.

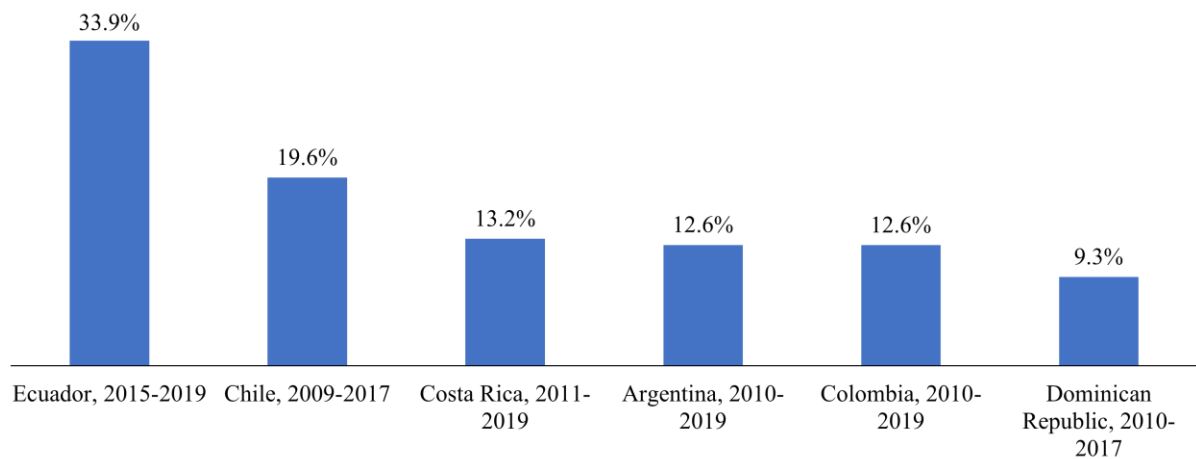
A third aspect to consider is the contrast of the contribution of migrants to GDP growth in expansionary contexts versus crisis contexts. In this regard, the dynamics of Latin American economies over the last decade provide a suitable framework for assessing the economic contributions of migrants in two different contexts. The first is during cycles of economic expansion, such as that experienced until 2019 in most countries of the region, and the second is during the economic recovery following the 2020 crisis triggered by the global COVID-19 pandemic, which affected all countries in the region.

Until 2019, in a context of long-lasting economic growth, migration played a significant role in the six selected countries. The case of Ecuador stands out, where one-third of GDP growth between 2015 and 2019 was generated by labor migrants. This substantial contribution can be primarily explained by the arrival of large groups of Venezuelan workers in a national context where, until then, immigration levels had remained very low.

The case of Chile is equally relevant in this regard, as between 2009 and 2019 immigrants contributed almost one-fifth of GDP growth. In this case, it is not only due to Venezuelan immigrants, but also to other migrant groups primarily from Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, and Haiti.

In the other four countries —Costa Rica, Argentina, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic— migrants contributed between 9.3% and 13.2% to GDP growth between 2010 and 2019. In all these cases, although the contribution is lower than in the two countries addressed above, it still is a proportion that exceeds the relative weight of immigrants in the employed workforce (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Contribution of Migrants to GDP Growth in an Economic Expansion Scenario (Pre-pandemic Period)



Source: Own estimates; based on, in Chile: Social Development and Family Ministry (2019 and 2017); Central Bank of Chile (2025); Argentina: INDEC (2010, 2019, and 2025); Costa Rica: INEC (2011 and 2019); Central Bank of Costa Rica (2024); Dominican Republic: ONE (2010 and 2017); Central Bank of the Dominican Republic (2025); Colombia: DANE (2010, 2019, and 2025); Ecuador: National Institute of Statistics and Census of the Republic of Ecuador (2015 and 2019); Central Bank of Ecuador (2025); and ECLAC (2025).

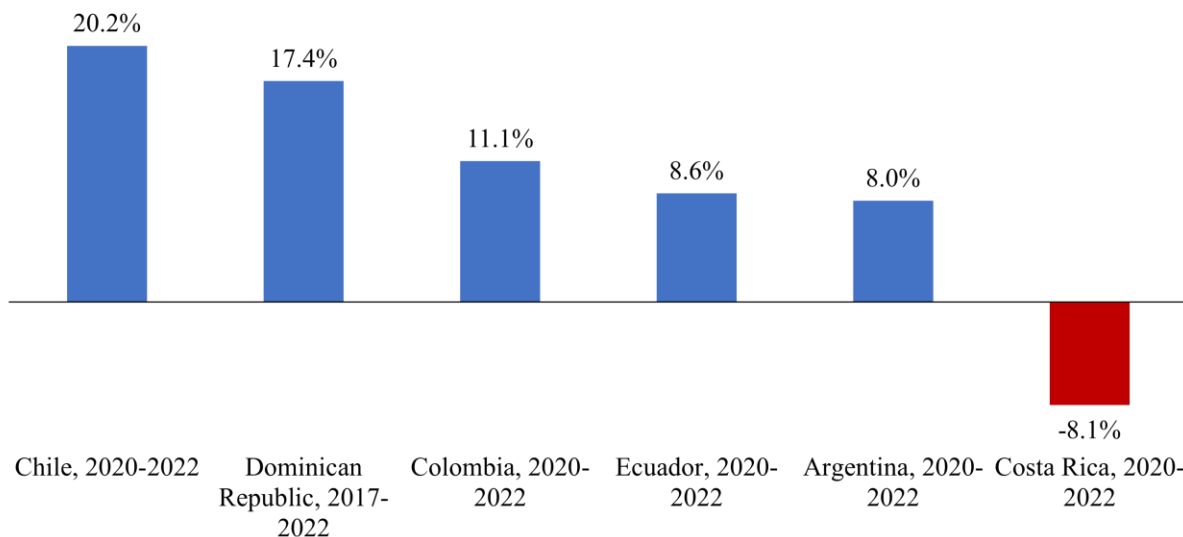
In the economic recovery scenario following the COVID-19 pandemic crisis of 2020, the contribution of immigrants to GDP growth in each country stands out again. In Chile, for example, between 2020 and 2022, immigrants contributed one-fifth of GDP growth, enabling the rapid recovery of the economy and reaching levels of activity even higher than those experienced before the 2020 crisis.

In the case of the Dominican Republic, unfortunately, information is not available to specifically analyze the period from 2020 to 2022, but rather for the period 2017–2022. What is relevant, in any case, is that for this five-year period, which includes the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent recovery from it, immigrants contributed 17.4% to economic growth and, in doing so, became a significant player in determining the dynamics and economic recovery of this country.

As for Colombia, Ecuador, and Argentina, although the contribution of migrants is relatively smaller than in the other two countries mentioned above, it is nonetheless important. In these three cases, their contribution to GDP recovery ranged between 11.1% and 8.0%, a rather non-negligible figure, and in all cases well above the relative weight of migrants in the employed workforce.

Only Costa Rica presents an opposite scenario. In this case, between 2020 and 2022, GDP experienced a significant recovery, growing by a cumulative 12.5% over the entire period. However, 2020 saw a significant reduction in the number of immigrants, which, by 2022, had still not recovered to pre-COVID-19 levels. While the number of native-born employed workers also decreased in 2020, by 2021 it had recovered to pre-crisis levels, reaching an even higher figure in 2022. The combination of these two dynamics means that during this 2020-2022 period GDP growth was primarily driven by the contribution of the native workforce, making this country an exception to the general rule in terms of the significant role of immigration in shaping recent economic trends (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Contribution of Migrants to GDP Growth in an Economic Recovery Scenario (2020-2022 Period, Post-COVID-19 Pandemic)



Source: Own estimates; based on, in Chile: Social Development and Family Ministry (2020 and 2022); Central Bank of Chile (2025); Argentina: INDEC (2020, 2022, and 2025); Costa Rica: INEC (2020 and 2022); Central Bank of Costa Rica (2024); Dominican Republic: ONE (2017 and 2022); Central Bank of the Dominican Republic (2025); Colombia: DANE (2020, 2022, and 2025); Ecuador: National Institute of Statistics and Census of the Republic of Ecuador (2020 and 2022); Central Bank of Ecuador (2025); and ECLAC (2025).

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

Just as in advanced societies, international migration also occupies a central place in the economic and social dynamics of Latin America. On the one hand, as a demographic element, migrants help to fill the labor shortages caused by native population aging and declining birth rates. On the other hand, as a workforce, they contribute to sustaining economic growth and, consequently, to capital accumulation and the reproduction of the economy.

In this regard, the data evidence that, given the advance of demographic change (declining birth rates and population aging), the economic and labor dynamics in these six countries of the region

are becoming increasingly dependent on the contributions made by migrants in these areas (Martínez & Cano, 2022). This situation became even more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, in which migrant workers played a fundamental role in sustaining economic activity and supporting the economic recovery in the immediate years after.

Nonetheless, despite the significant economic, labor, and demographic contributions of international migration, the discourses and perspectives that dominate public debate in the region tend to emphasize the potential costs and conflicts supposedly associated with mass migration, thus obscuring the substantive contributions already outlined.

These contributions should not be overlooked, and, from this perspective, should displace xenophobic rhetoric and take center stage in public debate, as well as in the analytical and understanding frameworks used to design migration policies and, especially, action and support programs for migrants. International migration in these countries, far from representing a risk and a danger to society, is, on the contrary, an essential component for deepening and consolidating the structural transformations that society demands.

Translation: Fernando Llanas

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