

Mexican Brain Drain To the U.S. and Canada¹

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THE PROBLEM

Mexico's brain drain is caused not only by its economic conditions and insecurity, but also by its NAFTA partners' attraction policies. Most Mexican professionals who live abroad choose the U.S. and Canada as their countries of adoption due to better opportunities for professional development, more favorable life-style conditions in North American cosmopolitan metropolises, or personal circumstances. These are but a few of a wide range of reasons why a Mexican may prefer to live up north, even when the same individual could get a job in his native country.

Accurate statistics on Mexican brain drain are not available, among other reasons, due to the variety of motives for migration, as well as to the existence of undocumented professionals in the U.S. and of fake refugees in Canada. We know that the U.S. is the country of adoption for 90 percent of Mexican migrants. Estimates put the number of Mexican professionals in the U.S. at about 830 000.² We know that 1 056 Mexican professionals entered Canada in 2009, compared to 16 710 low-skilled Mexicans the same year. In addition, 2 755 Mexican students reside in Canada, all of them



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potential candidates for staying abroad.³ In 2010, there were 3 866 permanent Mexican residents in Canada.⁴

DOUBTS ABOUT THE MEXICAN DIASPORA

Some journalists and scholars thought that the 2008 economic crisis would solve brain drain problems in emerging economies, including Mexico, due to economic problems in destination countries. However this prediction has not proved true. Skilled migrants were indeed affected by the economic recession, but the flows to the U.S. and Canada are still im-

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portant, proving that professionals are an elite group that benefits from certain autonomy from economic instability.

Given that massive returns are not possible, the Mexican government has launched several networking programs to use its Diaspora for development purposes, similar to what China and India are doing. But do Mexican professionals in North America have enough organization capabilities? Are they professionally well-enough settled to be able contribute to their country's economic development? Is it valid to aspire to a country's economic, scientific, and technological development depending on its Diaspora, rather than on its domestic development? Is it not the same as aspiring for a country's economy to depend on foreign aid? Can the Mexican government compete with the U.S., Canada, and transnational companies on the international human capital market?

To answer these questions, I shall start by looking at the policies to attract talent in the U.S. and Canada; secondly, I will review Mexican government measures; thirdly, I will look at some opinions of Mexican professionals in the U.S. and Canada. Finally I discuss differences between the idea and the reality of a Mexican Diaspora.

NAFTA LABOR AGREEMENTS

NAFTA, which came into effect in 1994, stipulates special visas for businessmen, investors, professionals, and experts in information technology and communication. While the U.S. has designed the TN visa to facilitate entry for Mexican and Canadian professionals, Canada has continued the same points system as before NAFTA. Mexico simply took advantage of the new conditions of emigration. The Mexican president at that time, Carlos Salinas, declared that the agreement would allow the country to export goods, not people. Nevertheless, the evolution of migration since then shows a significant increase in the migration of Mexican professionals to the U.S. and Canada.⁵

U.S. AND BRAIN ATTRACTION

The U.S. has an "alphabet soup of visas,"⁶ a system criticized by the skeptics who say that U.S. employers make up the scarcity of national skilled workers to justify importing cheaper, younger migrants. The majority of skilled workers get into the country with the H1B visas. In the 1990s, about 65 000 workers entered each year with this visa.⁷ In 2004, the number of H1B visas increased by 20 000 to include doctoral candidates.

With the crisis, applications for H1B visas decreased from 65 000 in 2008 to 45 000 in 2009. While the demand for U.S.-based skilled workers was stable, the demand for foreign skilled workers decreased. Nevertheless, returns were not massive. Some professionals such as those in engineering and health are still needed.

Compared to H1 visas, TN visas are attractive for employers as they are easier to get: they require less documentation and are cheaper than the former. Annual admission quotas are also bigger than for the H1. In 2005, 50 000 Canadians could be admitted on TN visas, compared to only 2 500 Mexicans. This difference is quite surprising, taking into account that the same year, Mexico had a workforce of 43.4 million, compared to only 16.3 million in Canada.⁸

Even during the 2008 world economic recession, TN visas for Mexicans showed a slow increase of 7.1 percent.⁹ By contrast, the admission of Canadian professionals slowed down after 2007, due to the competition between the TN and the other visas.

CANADA: THE POINTS SYSTEM

Canada accepts Mexicans on a point system introduced in 1993 and reformed in 2002. Points are calculated according to educational level, language skills, work experience, age, a job offer in Canada, and adaptability. Individuals who get more than 67 points on a scale of 100 are eligible for permanent residency. Despite the fact that the Canadian system responds to market needs, it attracts fewer skilled workers than the U.S.¹⁰

The Canadian economy was less affected by the crisis than the U.S. one. Canada is one of the few countries where no restriction was put on migration after the 2008 crisis. Jason Kenney, Canada's immigration minister at the time, declared that his country would continue its migration pol-

icy for economic areas that needed it, despite the crisis. He also said that migrants with extraordinary abilities would help Canada get out of the crisis. Therefore, the flows of skilled workers, including Mexicans, did not decrease.

In most cases, the crisis did not affect Mexican migrants in Canada. Canadian companies had signed long-term contracts that allowed them to weather the crisis, and the government helped with risk capital. One man even noticed that “there was a lot of capital investment in Canada and low taxes allowed many people to buy their own house.”¹¹ Many Mexican families migrated to Canada, mainly Quebec, in 2008-2009 due to the insecurity Mexico is experiencing at present.

MEXICAN DEFENSIVE PLANS

Since 1991, the National Council for Science and Technology (Conacyt) has been in charge of the Program to Retain and Repatriate Mexican Researchers, with limited results due to the scarcity of academic positions. Most of the repatriated come from the U.S., France, the UK, Spain, Canada, and Germany. A new Program for Student Mobility in North America (Promesan) was launched in 1995, involving 348 academic institutions. This initiative was financed by the Ministry of Education in Mexico, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) in the U.S., and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. Promesan was meant to validate studies and set up tri-national work teams.

In 2002, Mexico initiated its first plan of networking with the Diaspora. The Special Program for Science and Technology (PECYT) created that year stipulates the necessity of networking with Mexicans abroad.

In 2005, the Network of Mexican Talents Abroad (RTM) was created, with the aim of organizing the Diasporas and inducing them to cooperate with their home country. The project also benefited from cooperation with the Mexico-U.S. Foundation (FUMEC). During its six years of existence, the Network of Mexican Talents Abroad has been the Mexican government’s main effort to organize its Diaspora. RTM now functions based on local associations called “chapters,” distributed as follows: eight in the U.S.; three in Canada; and four in Europe. The link with Mexico is established through national institutions or “contact points” financed by bilateral projects. Even though the Network of Mexican Talents Abroad is an official initiative, its functioning depends on the civic organization of Mexicans abroad, who must show gen-

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uine interest in cooperating for the development of Mexico. This mixture of governmental and civic diplomacy is complemented by economic and educational institutions in the aforementioned national contact points. RTM is therefore a complicated plan with no serious competition from other associations of Mexicans abroad. Its most important results have been charity projects of the Houston chapter and business cooperation projects at Technology Business Accelerators in Michigan and Silicon Valley.

MEXICAN DIASPORA IN THE U.S. AND CANADA

In-depth interviews with 50 Mexican professionals based in the U.S. and Canada, aged between 29 and 47, revealed characteristics of their situation in the countries of adoption. Almost all of those interviewed are part of some association. Most belong to the Network of Mexican Talents abroad or to the Ex-A-Tec Association (former students of the Monterrey Institute of Technological Studies). The problem is that most of the members of one association do not cooperate with the other. Project development is slow; as one migrant put it, “Since people at the RTM are too talented, they act too cautiously, with too much precaution, and they need too much time to start projects.”¹² Even though this statement is a bit strong, it is true that the network has launched few bilateral projects. The most successful ones come from the U.S. and they explore business initiatives. This shows that Diaspora organization is a long-term process that needs funding and patience to bear fruit.

LOVE AND HATE

The sampled group shows two opposing tendencies: 1) demystifying their circumstances, complaining about difficult living conditions and discrimination, or 2) praising excellent liv-

ing conditions and emphasizing the bad image of Mexicans in the U.S. and Canada. The bad image seems to damage the possibilities for development of all Mexicans, included highly skilled ones.

The ones who criticize the situation of Mexicans in the destination country mention labor discrimination and poor access to education. These are frequent problems for migrants with little time abroad and with a more precarious situation in the destination country. In contrast, the ones with a better work and economic position think that discrimination is relative. "Discrimination influences you, if you let yourself be discriminated against," says one migrant.¹³ Some believe that discrimination is even stronger in Mexico, where racial prejudices are quite common.¹⁴

Another frequent topic is the comparison between the U.S. and Canada, above all for Mexican residents in Canada. Some appear to have chosen Canada because it is a society more open to migrants than the U.S. In Canada, they say, it is less probable that they will be discriminated against for being foreigners. This turns out to be a prejudice at times, when some of the individuals have never been to the U.S. but they still complain about it being racist.

As a matter of fact, the profile of migrants to the U.S. and Canada is different. There are almost no undocumented people in Canada, besides fake refugees. Most of the interviewees are proud to mention that Canada needs migrants and that therefore their social and moral status is higher than that of those in the U.S. On the contrary, some professionals in the U.S., above all the ones in New York, would sacrifice anything to live in this cosmopolitan city. It is they who need the city, not the city that needs them.

THE CRISIS

When asked about the effects of the 2008 crisis on their professional life, migrants in the U.S. and Canada mention budget cuts; higher costs of services due to the relation with the U.S. dollar; increasing competition with countries like France and Japan; rising working hours to boost productivity; the vulnerability of payment and of contracts for independent consultants; and staff reduction.

Only the ones in Canada mentioned governmental aid with risk capital to diminish the impact of the crisis; late impact of the crisis (in 2009); that the crisis was exaggerated by the media, sparking fear, but the results were not that serious.

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Migrants in the U.S. but not in Canada complained about the return of skilled workers to Mexico due to lack of jobs; their preference for more stable jobs as opposed to better paid jobs; companies going bankrupt; and higher living expenses.

THEY HAD A DREAM

New destinations in the U.S. and Canada help Mexican migrants fulfill their professional and private dreams. As one migrant put it, "We have dreams and this country helps us make them come true." At the same time, incentives for return are not enough in the current context of insecurity and insufficient professional opportunities in Mexico. This causes resentment and makes it difficult for migrants to cooperate with their native country.

Mexico has to compete with strong attraction factors in the U.S. and Canadian labor markets, due to their stronger economies and to NAFTA migration conditions. Taking into account previous diagnostic analyses that show that Mexico has not taken sufficiently advantage of the TN visas, the migration of professionals could even increase.

The Mexican government also uses its return initiatives to fight transnational companies that employ professionals on a global level. Mexico does not have a dynamic competition policy on the global market, such as promoting itself to attract foreigners and foreign investment; and it also expels "brains," a regular dynamic of globalization. At the same time, Mexico's scientific and economic policies are not attractive enough to seduce a significant number of foreigners to live in Mexico. The lesson from countries that are main migration destinations is that they always have an aggressive policy to attract talent, where human capital is equally or more valuable than foreign direct investment.

The government has chosen a defensive strategy of repatriation, return, and networking, but it is worth considering more active policies. For instance, Mexico has no plan for making use of the foreigners who receive graduate schol-

arships from Mexican universities or the Mexican Foreign Relations Ministry. On the contrary, migration institutions sometimes force these people to return to their own country when they get a job in Mexico.

Existing programs at economic, educational, migration, and political institutions for solving brain drain do not communicate, and therefore their efforts are minimized. The Institute for Mexicans Abroad and the National Council for Science and Technology are not the only ones that should attack the brain drain problem. There is need for an all-inclusive political effort to solve the country's problems, which will indirectly lead to better use being made of the Diaspora.

The Mexican government's efforts are limited when we think of transforming its Diaspora into economic elites. Even though it is good for the country to have economic, scientific, and technological elites that would eventually invest and cooperate with Mexico, elite formation depends on the professional and personal development of each Mexican professional and that is a problem that expatriate associations will solve only with difficulty.

A FINAL THOUGHT

The recruitment of professionals has not stopped with the crisis; therefore, countries have to take into account long-term tendencies. On the one hand, factors contributing to expulsion are stronger than the those contributing to the return of Mexicans who choose to live in the U.S. and Canada. On the other hand, Mexico's Diaspora of professionals is still in the process of organization, and sometimes it does not have the economic wherewithal to contribute to the country's development. ■■

NOTES

- ¹ Excerpts from the presentation "Mexican Professionals in North America: between Social Vulnerability and Economic Independence," delivered at the Congress of the Confederation of Mexican Graduate Students and Researchers in Canada (Ceimexcan), Toronto, October 21-23, 2011.
- ² J. Díaz de León, "Migración calificada en América Latina: Desafío para las políticas públicas," lecture in representation of the Mexican Foreign Affairs Ministry, in Montevideo, Uruguay, August 19, 2011.
- ³ Citizenship & Immigration Canada (2009). <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2009/index.asp>, accessed March 20, 2011.
- ⁴ Citizenship & Immigration Canada (2010). <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/statistics/facts2010/index.asp>, accessed March 20, 2011.
- ⁵ "Between 1820 and 2010, over 75 million immigrants arrived in the United States. About half were from Europe, including a tenth from the leading country of immigration, Germany. However, only four percent of German immigrants arrived since 1980, compared with three-fourths of Mexican immigrants, which is why Mexico surpassed Germany as the leading country of immigration in 2007." P. Martin, "NAFTA and Mexico-US Migration: What Lessons, What Next?" vol. 11, no. 4, Institute for Economic Research at the University of Munich (December 2010), p. 38.
- ⁶ Lindsay Lowell, "Skilled Temporary Specialty Workers in the United States," vol. 7, no. 1 (1999), pp. 24-32.
- ⁷ *Migration News*, April 2009.
- ⁸ P. Orrenius and D. Streitfeld, "TN Visas: A Stepping Stone toward a NAFTA Labor Market" (November-December 2006), Dallas, pp. 10 -13.
- ⁹ R. Cruz-Piñero and W. Ruiz-Ochoa, "Migración calificada de mexicanos a Estados Unidos mediante visado preferencial," vol. 16, no. 66 (October-December 2010), pp. 103-135.
- ¹⁰ J. Doomernik, R. Koslowski, and D. Threnhardt, (Washington, D.C.: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2009), <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/index.cfm>.
- ¹¹ Engineer, 33; five years in Montreal.
- ¹² IT engineer, 47; nine years living in Canada.
- ¹³ Chief of global strategy, 36; 12 years living in the U.S.
- ¹⁴ Network engineer, 54; 26 years living in Canada.

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