

Migration in Malinalco: Summarized Report

Author: Adrián Hernández Santisteban
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Translation prepared by:
Connecting Communities in the Americas (CCA)

Introduction

Fundación Comunitaria Malinalco took the initiative to carry out a mapping project of people who emigrate from the municipality and their families who remain. This was a project that was part of *Building Broader Communities in the Americas* with Comunalía, CFLeads, the Inter-American Foundations and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. The primary purpose of the study was to learn more about the current situation of migration and recommend ways that Fundación Comunitaria Malinalco and its partners can combine efforts in support of families from their communities, create initiatives and design programs that address the issues that are identified.

From the beginning, we decided to record our findings publicly and were therefore careful not to publish any personal information that would make any of the individuals who experience migration more vulnerable.

This is a summary of the longer report in Spanish, available through *Fundación Comunitaria Malinalco* or on the Connecting Communities in the Americas [webpage](#).

As an aid to the reader, the following are observations about the methodology and design of the project:

- ❑ Due to limitations in time and resources, this is not a study based on statistical significance. Instead, we sought to identify characteristics, perceptions and primary stakeholders of this topic.
- ❑ Some advantages to this approach are that we were able to carry out the study at a lower cost, with more flexibility and highlighting the richness in personal stories.
- ❑ At the same time, this study cannot offer precise percentages or representative numbers about the migration flow, since it is a study based on perceptions.
- ❑ We decided to focus on communities that had been previously identified with high levels of migration. We were able to interview 30 individuals and 15 focus groups in various communities, and carry out four sessions of Appreciative Inquiry with high school students, for a total of 344 participants.
- ❑ The information that we gathered was compared with existing government and academic publications from various institutions such as the *Encuesta de Migración Mexiquense*, Bank of Mexico, the Community Foundation of Morelos and the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico.
- ❑ The surveys and interview questions were designed to include gender, age and geographical diversity as much as possible.

- ❑ To complement the research process, we included other activities based on best practices, including workshops on the culture of peace, exhibits for parents with information about migration (in collaboration with Instituto del Rincón), and other family resources.

The following is an initial summary of generalizations about migration movement:

- ❑ Migration is a practice across three generations within the municipality.
- ❑ The intensification of migration, as in other parts of Mexico, began at the end of the 1970s.
- ❑ Two primary motivations for migration are a) the search for resources to improve the quality of life for families and individuals and b) desire for adventure and new experiences among young people.
- ❑ Positive aspects of migration include increasing remittances from 2013 to the present, improved quality of life and an increase in education levels for the children and youth in these families.
- ❑ Negative aspects of migration include the separation of families, difficulty in accessing services when lacking documentation, and contexts of discrimination and rejection.
- ❑ In some cases, family ties are abandoned by the emigrant because of isolation or the development of new ties outside of the community of origin.
- ❑ In some places, transnational communities are formed to support others in the region, job searches and social events.
- ❑ The various participants coincide that it is not possible to focus only on the population from Malinalco in the U.S., but rather on larger communities that include those from other parts of Mexico or from Latin America in general and are often referred to as “Latino” or “Hispanic.”

Migration with documentation includes:

- ❑ emigrants who processed their migratory papers in the U.S. in the last two decades of the 20th century and can cross legally back and forth.
- ❑ children born in the U.S. of immigrant parents, have maintained connections with, and who frequently travel between the two countries.
- ❑ temporary residence in the U.S. with visas that are processed through employers, primarily in the agricultural sector.
- ❑ temporary residence in Canada through the binational program coordinated with the Mexican Secretariat of Labor.

Undocumented migration happens primarily:

- ❑ through family connections, where the individual is invited by family members who help them to cross and receive them in their communities.
- ❑ with groups of people from various places. In this case the person hears of an opportunity and chooses to join a group for the journey.
- ❑ alone. This case is not perceived to be as common, but involves an individual who, inspired by stories about the success in living in the North, goes with his or her own resources.
- ❑ through intermediary networks that announce job opportunities and offer to facilitate the crossing. Once the people arrive and start working, they pay back the costs of the journey.

- Costs of crossing with the assistance of an intermediary or *coyote* (in U.S. dollars):
 - 1990 - \$300
 - 2005 - \$500
 - 2010 - \$3,000
 - 2013 - \$4,000 - \$7,000
 - 2019 - \$5,000 - \$8,000

A. Positive Aspects of Migration

The following are some of the positive impacts that were identified by the participants over the past three decades:

- construction of family assets, in particular improvements in housing
- additional income that increases purchasing power for basic and secondary needs
- higher mobility of families in Mexico, in particular for commercial and educational activities
- establishment of commercial entities for tourism or in general
- contributions toward the remodeling of religious temples and patron saint festivities
- opportunities to study in the U.S. for those who had abandoned schooling in Mexico
- transmission of knowledge acquired abroad for fieldwork or professional services
- value on the effort and contribution to general family wellbeing by the family member who is abroad
- higher interest in the situation of families and communities of origin, leading to contributions toward community and human rights initiatives

B. The Profile of Emigrants

According to the information we were able to gather for this study, the profile of individuals emigrating to the United States and Canada has changed over the past decades. When the municipality first started experiencing emigration, our interviewees reported that the majority who were leaving were young men who were looking for temporary or permanent work abroad. With time, the profiles of emigrants began to diversify. Instead of individuals travelling alone, today we see more families, as well as the formation of binational families who have children born in the United States.

According to the participants of this study, the following are several of the motivations for emigrants to live abroad (push factors):

- uniting with family and looking for work opportunities abroad
- searching for resources to improve the quality of life for the family or for a specific project
- escaping from volatile situations or avoiding run-ins with the authorities
- resolving issues from past journeys or meeting with family and friends again

- fulfilling a personal desire to explore or develop
- planning a reunification of communities of origin, despite a lot of time abroad
- planning to give birth to children in the United States who would have dual citizenship

Migrant identities

As emigrants, we refer to people who have chosen to abandon their place of origin or residence in Mexico and, for some reason or other, move abroad. We identified six stages of this process, which also lead to transformations in how individuals think and identify themselves.

1. leaving the community of origin
2. mixed experiences while crossing the border
3. arriving to the host community and adapting
4. acculturation and making new decisions in life
5. establishing oneself abroad
6. returning to the community of origin

Those that return

We identified common characteristics of those people who had returned to their community of origin:

- work expectations - Many who returned did not believe the salaries in Mexico to be adequate, yet do not find other options. For this reason, many preferred to begin their own businesses and be self-employed.
- questioning local ways of life - Several people commented about how those who return often make comparisons about life elsewhere and begin to question local practices.
- changes in appearance - Some people commented about the changes in haircuts, types of hats they wear, the use of tattoos or body piercing or the way they are dressed, which also impacts the community of origin and influences youth in particular.
- consumption of narcotics - Some interviewees mentioned returnees from the U.S. with drug habits that they hadn't had before.
- cultural references - The types of music, television programs and internet contents seem to be different with those who are returning. At the same time, many identified new words or expressions that were different from those used in the community.

Another topic that is important to address is the arrival of those who were born abroad but children of those who originated from the municipality in Mexico. The participants recognized that it was not a question of transformation, but that these individuals are binational and have characteristics of both countries:

The Mexicans who were born in the United States and came to Mexico are not migrants, but immigrants who have emigrated from the U.S. to Mexico [...] The presence of this population has intensified in the last years because the climate of migration has not been favorable and so people have needed to return with their children and everything. (Teran, 2019, 39).

The interviewees also identified two types of newly formed identities that have formed due to the phenomenon of migration:

- ❑ The identity of children and youth who were born in the U.S. and brought to Mexico as minors and expected to adapt to the communities there.
- ❑ The culture of *cholos* and gangs - Some of the young people that emigrated to the U.S. adopted the style and practices of Latino gangs, including new ways to express themselves, clothing styles, and expected behaviors to be able to belong to the group.

C. Migrant Women and Women in Migrant Families

In the focus groups and some interviews, we were able to collect migration experiences from the perspectives of women. This section summarizes these ideas.

From the information we were able to gather, the experiences of women crossing the border without documentation was more negative than that of men. They mentioned that although the risks of the actual crossing are the same for everyone, women are more vulnerable to abuse by organized crime, by other migrants and by the *coyotes* themselves (people who smuggle others across the border). They also mentioned that in the majority of cases these experiences leave scars if they are not treated or at least shared with family members:

There are women who receive all kinds of harassment and don't tell anyone.

Nothing happens to a lot of them, but the risk is higher than with men. I wouldn't want any women from my family to cross.

In contrast to men, women mentioned that one motivation to emigrate was sometimes to have a child in the U.S. so that it will have citizenship and more opportunities for schooling and in life generally. However, this motivation has also separated women from their children, either voluntarily or by force, when they themselves did not have the proper migration documentation.

Women who belonged to families of migrants changed their own perspectives of themselves and felt it intensified their sense of responsibility:

Other women referred to the migration experience as an empowering situation leading to economic stability. They mentioned that while working in the U.S. they separated from their husbands and were able to raise their children alone. At the same time, there were a few cases of women living in the U.S. while their partners remained in Mexico. Although this is considered unusual, examples of women who send remittances home to their families in Mexico are increasing.

Finally, there were cases in which women became susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases when their husbands had other partners while living abroad. In the words of one interviewee:

We are left alone. They might support with money, but we are responsible for the children and the home. It isn't so easy to raise them alone - sometimes they need a male role model."

In my case, my husband and I talk a lot, but I know of others where he just disappears and, well, no husband and no money.

There was a case where a person brought HIV from there and passed it on to his wife. There are many pretty girls that are going to beg you, but then you fall into a mess.

D. Communities in Foreign Countries: Origin and Destiny

Individuals and their families who have originated from the Malinalco municipality are found in at least 15 states in the U.S., different regions of Canada and, according to some interviewees, there are even more recent cases in the United Arab Emirates.

Characteristics of communities from Malinalco in the U.S.

Once we located people who have lived in the U.S., we were able to interview those who are currently in Mexico but had lived in these communities or have family members there. In this way, we were able to identify some different characteristics about these communities and the activities that they engage in:

- integration into Mexican or Latino communities in their place of residence
- a perception of unity and solidarity between traditional rivals from the municipality: "*Over there they don't fight - everyone is equal*"
- the dispersal throughout different regions of the U.S., without a clear organizational structure beyond family relationships
- families as the most reliable network, followed those of the same region of origin, the Mexican community and finally, the Latino community in general
- assistance to the broader network by connecting families through food, gifts, messages and other articles, as well as helping to locate family members
- participation in activities and networks of other groups and communities from other regions of the state, such as in religious events, sports events and festivals

Organization of migrant communities in the U.S.

In the interest of learning about activities that migrants from Malinalco do together and which of those activities could be strengthened as community projects and programs, we have identified both formal and informal examples. Aside from family events, the majority center around sports or religious activities.

There are also collective actions focused on supporting and defending migrants in cases of emergency, such as after an accident, death or when someone is detained. In the words of one interviewee:

Yes, yes, there is unity. If you don't have a license and you are stopped, the group goes to get you out. They also help each other out if a family member has died.

Organizations of migrant communities in Mexico and support institutions

The following are some of the organizations and their programs that could offer support to migrants and their families from Malinalco:

In Malinalco and surrounding municipalities

- Instituto del Rincón*
- Fundación Origen*
- Corazones Unidos de Zumpahuacan*
- Pastoral de la Movilidad Humana*
- Imaginalco*
- Fundación Comunitaria Malinalco*

At a state or federal level

- Coordination of International Matters, State of Mexico (Edo. de México)
- Jesuit Service to Migrants
- Sin Fronteras*
- National Commission of Human Rights
- High Commission of the United Nations for Refugees
- Office for the International Organization for Migrants, Mexico

Types of support programs that currently exist.

The following is a list of types of programs that currently exist to address various issues experienced by the migrant population:

- support services for emergencies during transit to the U.S., while crossing the border, or due to illness or death abroad
- family searches and communication

- food services for families in Mexico
- support programs for local infrastructure funded by remittances
- documentation services for migrants
- documentation services for dual citizens and their families
- transport for the elderly in order to find their relatives
- support for returnees and those born in the U.S. and arriving with migrant family members
- psychological support for migrants and their families
- services for legal, temporary work opportunities, mainly in agriculture, though specific visa programs

Additional needs that some interviewees identified and that should be addressed include:

- reducing the risks of crossing the border without documentation and protection from human rights violations
- supporting free movement of family members [between countries]

E. The Physical, Emotional and Familial Costs of crossing the Border without Documentation

Practically all of the interviewees expressed their concern about the increasing difficulty of crossing the border between Mexico and the United States over the past several years. They mentioned that in the past the risks, mainly physical in nature or being victims of abuse by authorities on both sides of the border, could be faced. Nevertheless, they perceived an increase in violence on the part of the criminal organizations in the past ten years:

It seems like they already have it all planned out - the ways they catch you. Then the bands of 'cholos' come and empty you out. If you don't have anything to give them, they take your clothes. The coyote doesn't interfere. And many of them are sick. They rape the women in broad daylight and you can't do anything. If you interfere, they kill you.

On several occasions, they talked about the physical treatment that they received during the journey to their destinies, including overcrowding and abuse.

They pass so many people at the same time. In the buses they packed us like sacks...poor you if you have someone fat who is on top of you - your legs fall asleep. There isn't even a way to stretch out, and if you start making noise, they yell at you and threaten you. Also, they don't even let you urinate, saying that if a cop sees our group, they'll send us back. You need to be one of the last to get in so that you are on top and have less weight above you. It's like an eternity.

F. Challenges with the Temporary Work Programs

People from different communities have also opted for other alternatives to undocumented journeys through programs that exist for season agricultural workers in the U.S.A. and Canada. In those programs, companies that need people during certain time periods request a set number of visas to hire foreigners. However, some interviewees did not see it as an attractive option because:

the work they offer you in the fields and very exhausting and they pay less than in other activities in the cities

Still others saw it as an alternative that has become more and more popular because it permits one to save, transfer money through banks and other legal means, and move around more securely and with documentation.

Some people from the municipality reported that they had participated up to 14 times in these types of programs, although they felt that the complications to this type of circular migration were only increasing:

It is a program for young people, since you need energy and efficiency for field work. In some places they pay you according to the amount of product that you collect, so that as you begin to lose strength as you get older, you start to receive less pay.

The program has been opened to other countries in Central America and the Caribbean, whose inhabitants compete for the same positions as Mexicans. Some of the interviewees mentioned that the farm owners in some contexts prefer people from Guatemala or Jamaica because they stay longer than the Mexicans do.

Increased requirements for visas have also made it more difficult to obtain them since, in the case of Canada, they administer an exam about farming and:

...sometimes they ask questions about cultivating or techniques that are not used in Malinalco, so since we don't know about them, we fail the exam.

Other people who were interviewed explained that the program conditions and types of work are not always attractive for young people:

They don't let you move around much...they are watching you. On Sundays they took us to Wal-Mart and occasionally to go out, but the rest of the week you just work. A lot of people prefer to work in restaurants or city businesses because they earn more per hour and are paid completely, without discounts. They don't pay the insurance that we have and the work is really hard.

G. The Challenges for Families that Stay in Mexico

The relatives of people that have emigrated to the U.S. mentioned the following challenges that they currently face:

- a) Separation of the family and absence of a parent. One of the general concerns of those who stay in the community of origin is the change within the nuclear family. This phenomenon, they mention, commonly means that the children grow up without one of the parents.

When the father leaves, there comes a moment when the little ones don't want to obey their mother and then they get into things they shouldn't and end up in problems.

Some people even remembered that one of the reasons that several emigrants had to return was the “*feeling that their children were losing it.*”

- b) Changes in the couple's relationship. The ones who stay, primarily women who become the heads of their households, mentioned that when one of them stayed abroad for months each year, that person “*becomes a stranger.*” This means that when he or she returns, it can take weeks or months to readapt to the nuclear family.
- c) The possibility that an emigrant forms a new family abroad is a concern of some that stay behind, and vice versa, since there are stories of both situations in different towns of the municipality:

It can happen that one is there all alone and meets someone, and all of the sudden they even get married to get the paperwork or because they love each other and they have children - and the family here, well, whatever.

Or on the other hand, “the man over there sending money all the time, while here the mother and children are already with someone else.

On occasion, some said, the simple suspicion of infidelity or this type of situation causes problems between the couple and their families and can result in the break of communication.

- d) When an emigrant sends money regularly to the family in Mexico, the latter starts accumulating additional resources, which in time generates a perception of increased wealth in the community. This sometimes resulted in people not wanting to be interviewed because it made them feel more vulnerable to crimes such as kidnapping for extortion, which could endanger their families.

H. The Challenges for those that Return

Another set of challenges that participants in this study identified were those faced by people returning from the United States. They mentioned that especially in the last ten years, some emigrants have returned either voluntarily or forcefully. This situation has transformed some characteristics of the community of origin or in the one where they choose to live.

- Challenges faced by people that return include
 - reintegration into their families following long periods of absence
 - difficulty in adapting to the customs of the place of origin
 - finding a job that is well-paid
 - lack of Mexican documentation for those who were born in the U.S., primarily minors who return with their parents
 - finding a way to invest and work with the capital that they accumulated abroad, if they have any

- Challenges faced in the places of origin include
 - negative attitudes of those that return or arrive for the first time to Mexico if they were born abroad, such as, *“they feel superior, they don’t like anything here, they are always comparing [it to over there].”*
 - assimilation of a person who stayed abroad for a long time and feels like a “foreigner” in the place of origin.
 - understanding the way of thinking and behaving of some of the people and families who return.
 - violent or negative attitudes within the community of some individuals who had been involved with gangs or narcotics.
 - possibly the real access to educational, health and general public services to those who return and their families.

I. Challenges for Institutions and in Civil Society

Members of organizations and grassroots groups who were also interviewed and who work in support of migrants and their families also identified certain challenges that should be considered in the immediate future, including

- apathy or lack of initiative on part of the state governments.
- the unequal organization that exists between the different groups of migrants in the region. Some communities are more united abroad and have the opportunity to organize events and reach

higher goals. However, the situation in this municipality makes it difficult to incentivise specific activities or support specific groups.

- establishing a Migrants' Club to begin building a basic structure of support within the community.
- to be able to establish channels of support beyond emergencies. The organizations that work on this topic think that the general population approaches them in emergencies, yet the hidden nature of the situation makes it difficult to carry out programs for prevention that are more effective.

J. Perspective for the Future and Opportunities for Fostering Collective Action

By analyzing the information gathered from the various interviews, we found similarities in the perception that migration will continue to occur in the near future and that there is a lack of addressing its causes. They also think the number of those that return will increase, based on the increasing number of people with dual citizenship and changes in migration policy in the U.S. At the same time, they believe that ties between those that live in Malinalco and those that live abroad will strengthen.

It was possible to collect ideas for activities and initiatives that could address the primary needs and concerns of the people who migrate and their families. Even though some programs already exist and some ideas are not new, they agreed that there is still much to do to address the whole population:

- generate competitive sources of employment in the communities of origin, primarily those that put value on agriculture and increase wages for farm workers,
- create investment plans in Mexico where one can strategically invest money earned in the United States, in order to be able to permanently reside in Malinalco,
- give training to young emigrants on financial and investment opportunities, because if they don't have them it is harder to improve their quality of life in Mexico, and
- advocate for open border policies and attractive temporary work programs.

Of the programs that currently exist, the recommendation is to strengthen them and adapt them to the local needs of the municipality:

- reacquaintance of families. For this, they mentioned the possibility of creating a Migrant Club in the municipality that could facilitate visas for the elderly and prepare cases for humanitarian visas. This is an interest that was voiced primarily in the southern part of the municipality.
- family search. Maintain and strengthen efforts of institutions that collaborate in the search for family members in the U.S.
- food support and covering other basic needs of families who remain and do not have another source of income.
- disseminate and facilitate migration documentation for dual citizenship in communities that are not yet aware of that process.

Aspirations for the future

As a final part of some interviews and focus groups, we asked participants about what messages they would like to send to younger generations about their expectations for the phenomenon of migration in the future. The responses are divided between those in favor of migration, those against it and a neutral position.

Of those participants who found a **positive** influence of migration on individuals and the community, we found:

- a perception of a better life in the U.S and in Mexico, and that the risks are less than the benefits:

Things are nice there. Everyone has different thoughts and luck. Sometimes luck runs ahead of you, but you live better, the money is enough and you can have a better life.

- a perception of an alternative option when there aren't sufficient forms of production in Mexico:

If a young person doesn't have any land, let him go. You also have to see if he has enough for the coyote, but here they won't pay what they'll pay him there.

- a perception of the possibility of getting resources more quickly to start life projects:

In one year you can save up a million pesos [approx. \$60,000 U.S.).

Yes, let them go. If God gives them life and lets them pass, I hope they are smart enough because since you earn money quickly there, you can also lose it quickly. On pay days, a small plane would fly by and announce a dance, and everyone would go. They spent \$300 in one weekend and couldn't make it through to the next paycheck.

Those who thought about it **negatively** expressed the following:

- a perception that alone the physical risks did not make it worth it:

They hit them and do anything; they rape the women. Who is going to want to expose their daughter or a family member to something like that? It's better to figure out how to get ahead here. Or at least that they get a visa. Before, they didn't bother with the visa because crossing the border was easy, but now there is no other way.

- a perception of negative economic consequences for people and their family members:

I say don't go. There are some who, instead of doing something [with the money], they lose everything here with debts. It's not worth it.

At times we found a third perspective, more dependent on the situation. These people found every case to be different - some successful and some that were not:

- a perception about opportunities both in Mexico and in the U.S. and that it should be a personal decision:

If they are going to get their papers and it goes well, great. If not, then just do your best here in Mexico.

- a perception that a family in Mexico can improve their quality of life, despite the sacrifice of one member of the family:

It is good up to a certain point. Families need to value the efforts of the one who goes, because there are many who want to go to do something for their children.

- a perception that the decision depends on specific life plans and aspirations:

If they go, it should be with a goal, to do something for themselves so that the suffering is not in vain and so they make the best of the situation. And that they do something here too for when they return.

Recommendations for a dialogue about the topic and ideas for follow up

This study is meant to give a general idea of the phenomenon of migration in the municipality of Malinalco in order to foster deeper understanding and identify areas of opportunity for the design of social programs that facilitate the support for families in migration. Some of the ideas that have been gathered during this study focus on possible steps to follow.

- Generate a common strategy between groups and institutions that are focused on migration. Instead of creating new projects, we should strengthen and possibly refocus those that already exist for the whole municipal population.
- Create a working group with the three levels of government in order to potentialize public policy and adapt them to the needs of the municipality.
- Strengthen groups of migrants who are not yet well organized but already have some events, so that they can formalize their work such as with Migrant Clubs.
- Study best practices from other organizations that have already worked in this area and learn from their mistakes.
- Create a platform to finance and train local groups so that they can work on projects that are aimed at the root economic causes of migration and reintegration of the family.
- Adapt already existing programs for working with youth and adults in financial education and creating personal projects, so that they can learn to channel the capital that they have acquired.
- Adapt existing programs to strengthen collective actions within the municipality, to motivate individuals and groups to work on this topic.