



REGIONAL SESSION ON THE AMERICAS
Economic Integration and Migration Governance

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Key issues

1. Migration trends in the Americas have changed rapidly and rather profoundly. Migrations from Latin America toward the United States is one of the most salient features. Latin America has ceased being an attractive destination for migrants from outside, while at the same time, sizeable Latin American migrants return to their former countries of origin. Decades-old inter-Latin American migration flows presently exhibit diminished strength. The discrepancies between the creation of transnational labor markets and the rules allowing those labor markets to operate orderly create very unfavorable conditions for these movements.

2. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed extensive economic restructuring in Latin American countries whose consequences have been, to this date, disappointing in terms of economic growth, development goals and improvements in labor market conditions. At the same time, U.S. labor demand has been remarkable. Moreover, increasing social and cultural contacts are raising people's demands as they become aware of the wellbeing gaps across countries. Thus, migration pressures in the Continent are the result of these disparate growth and development paths that have widened economic and social gaps within the Americas.

3. There is little that regional initiatives have done to translate the enormous migratory pressures into orderly movements of labor and people within the Americas, and/or to implement policies among whose objectives were to prevent the building up of those pressures. Quite frequently, the answers to the changing migration circumstances have been *ad hoc*, vague, and reactive. Although the U.S. is firmly committed to immigration, there is also great ambivalence *vis-à-vis* current migration flows. Most countries in Latin America have not engaged seriously to tackle migratory governance issues; either regarding development efforts or regarding regulatory actions.

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Content

In a very short period of time migration trends in the Americas have changed rapidly and rather profoundly. The most salient feature at the dawn of the XXI century are the migrations from Latin America toward the United States. In 2003, almost 18 million immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean live in the United States; a figure roughly 10 times that of 1970. Latin America has ceased being an attractive destination for migrants from outside, while at the same time, sizeable Latin American migrants return to their former countries of origin. Decades-old inter-Latin American migration flows presently exhibit diminished strength.

Two indicators summarize the many issues raised by recent migration trends: first, the size of the migrants in an irregular situation; second, the disharmony between forceful economic integration processes and the migratory governance situation.

Undocumented Latin Americans in the United States are estimated at some 7-8 million. Many overstay their visa regulations; many more –particularly Mexicans and Central Americans– enter surreptitiously. The discrepancies between the creation of transnational labor markets and the rules allowing those labor markets to operate orderly create conditions for human smuggling and trafficking to prosper, as well as for death and violence to mount while crossing borders. Around three thousand deaths have been recorded since 1993 on the U.S.-Mexico border; a sizeable, although unknown, number of deaths have occurred on the Mexico-Guatemala border; or when migrants are in transit or at sea.

Since the 1980s most Latin American countries have abandoned their previous inward orientation and attempted to institutionalize open economic systems. Subgroups of countries constitute diverse clubs for liberalizing trade within the Americas and with the outside world –MERCOSUR, NAFTA, APEC are just a few of the various agreements. The most ambitious of all is the projected Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The 1980s and 1990s witnessed extensive economic restructuring whose consequences have been, to this date, disappointing in terms of economic growth, development goals and improvements in labor market conditions.

The above migration trends can be seen as manifestations, though unplanned and spontaneous, of current regional economic integration. Many factors account for these movements; however, one not insignificant is the almost complete absence of appropriate domestic and regional policies to manage the effects of this economic restructuring and integration.

At the same time, U.S. labor demand has been remarkable. After the 1982 deep recession, the economy launched into a sustained boom interrupted only by a minor recession in 1991 and the slow-down of the early 2000s. Moreover, given the increasing social and cultural contacts within the Continent, facilitated by technological advances, social aspirations have tended to become homogenized, raising people's demands as they become aware of the wellbeing gaps. Even developments toward more participatory and democratic values might also have raised expectations among the various populations.



Thus, migration pressures in the Continent are the result of these disparate growth and development paths that have widened economic and social gaps within the Americas. Meanwhile, there is little that regional initiatives have done to translate the enormous migratory pressures into orderly movements of labor and people within the Americas, and/or to implement policies among whose objectives were to prevent the building up of those pressures.

Most countries in the hemisphere share a fundamental disposition to accept, and to attract, mostly qualified migrants, but to restrain the flows of the unskilled, accepting them preferably on a temporary basis. Quite frequently, the answers to the different migration circumstances have been *ad hoc*, vague, and reactive. In general, most countries tend to combine restrictive with selectively open migration policies.

The Central American Common Market and CARICOM agreements incorporate rules that allow for a limited liberalization of movement for their citizens; the Andean Community of Nations and MERCOSUR, although envision the liberalization of labor, so far have not advanced into the specifics. NAFTA does not aim to transcend the trade and investment realms; and the same is true for the planned FTAA.

Initiatives dealing directly with migratory governance are just starting to develop. The Regional Conference on Migration (RCM) that incorporates the countries of North and Central America, plus the Dominican Republic, had its first meeting in 1996. The RCM constitutes itself as a forum for dialogue and an arena for cooperative engagement. The protection of migrants' rights is the area that has received most attention. The first South American Conference on Migration took place in 2000, constituting itself as a forum for consultation and coordination. This conference incorporates some ten countries of that region.

The Summit of the Americas, that includes almost all countries of the continent, has not paid enough attention to migration issues. The Plan of Action of the Third Summit of the Americas (Quebec, 2001) called governments to foster the continental realities of free trade and democracy, through negotiated rules and accords; however, migration –another continental reality– hardly received any attention.

Given that the major continental migration trends are from the South toward the North, the policies of the United States deserve special attention. (Canada has signed temporary workers agreements –of a relatively modest scale– with the Caribbean and with Mexico (since 1974).) Although the U.S. is firmly committed to immigration, there is also great ambivalence *vis-à-vis* current migration flows. On the one hand, the prevailing attitude is to support the economy and employers by facilitating access to the best foreign talent and needed workers. On the other, legislation and various other measures have made more difficult the conditions for immigration, in general, and for undocumented immigrants, in particular.

In this context, the 2001 Mexico-U.S. high-level discussions are of particular importance as an attempt to find responses to the lingering migration issue. Discussions entered on regularizing undocumented migrants, and temporary workers movements; on improving border conditions; on increasing entry visas; and (ideationally) on cooperating towards Mexico's development.



However, after the September 11 terrorist attacks this endeavor was suspended. Currently, national security concerns prevail and borders are being rediscovered and reconceptualized, with yet unknown implications for migratory governance, although the emerging scenario would probably be less accommodating regarding migratory movements.

Migration governance in the region is a complicated jigsaw puzzle. The United States does not seem ready (as well as Canada) to discuss and change its positions on the rules governing international migration nor there is any indication that it is prepared to move beyond its “traditional position” –that predicates that the liberalization of trade in goods and of capital movements is a sufficient strategy to ignite the development processes and to make countries to converge economically and socially– notwithstanding that a broader cooperative perspective may upgrade the development chances of the continent (unaware that the mere economic liberalization has not been able to stem the migration flows, that social and cultural globalizations are driving individuals and societies to demand that barriers and borders to labor be also lower).

On the Latin American side, most countries have not engaged seriously on migratory governance. These societies need to redefine the case for a broad-based domestic development –with higher rates of economic growth to create dynamic labor absorption centers to clear domestic labor markets abundantly supplied by still rapidly growing labor forces.

Nor most Latin American countries seem committed to consider major regulatory actions to oversee the proper exit of their citizens and to protect them adequately. The policy declarations are vague and posturing; quite often they limit themselves to demand the protection of migrants’ rights. Certainly, there is increased cooperation on this front between most countries of origin, transit and destination. However, this self-imposed limitation reflects a rather defensive position that tacitly accepts as a fact of life the current unsatisfactory situation regarding migratory governance in the region.