The Neglected Border: Migration and Human Rights at Mexico's Southern Border

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The Neglected Wall: Migration and Human Rights at Mexico’s Southern Border

Jessica Bahena

A Thesis in the Field of International Relations
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University
May 2019
Abstract

The complexion of migrant flows over Mexico's southern border has changed forcefully in contemporary generations. This study explores the historical trends of Central American migration, the complexity of Mexico’s southern border, and reasons for the failure of programs implemented to protect migrants’ rights. The argument proposed in this thesis is that despite being framed in a language that promotes protection, Mexican border enforcement policies and practices obscure the violence on the ground. It finds that programs implemented by the Mexican government to protect migrants’ rights and regulate migration from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), which includes, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador failed because its foreign policy objectives focused on second-order effects produced by the war against organized crime. Historically, Mexico has been a country of transit for migrants, especially from the NTCA; however, previous Mexican administrations have responded to the phenomenon in very distinct ways causing a lack of integral and effective framework. Since 2000, Mexican governments have faced distinct matters, both domestic and international, which have aided in promoting dialogue regarding border management and the regulation of unauthorized immigration. Mexico has accomplished vital advances to promote protection to unauthorized immigrants, but the process of planning and the assessment of migration policies are hardly explained, and the implementation of programs is ineffective due to institutional weaknesses.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the people making difficult journeys to the Southern Border of Mexico and the United States Border. You are important. You matter.
Acknowledgments

This thesis could not have been possible without the support from the following people. First, I would like to express my gratitude to my Thesis Director Prof. Jacqueline Bhabha, for her guidance and knowledgeable support throughout this process. She made my work stronger by providing feedback and encouraging me to look at the study in different angles to make my thesis more robust. Thank you for your flexibility and support.

To my advisors Doug Bond and Sarah E. Powell, thank you for your support and for always being there to meet whenever I needed to.

Finally, I am thankful for the enduring support of my parents throughout this ambitious journey and my life in general.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication .......................................................... iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments ..................................................... v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables ......................................................... viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures ....................................................... ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I. Mexico’s Southern Border Framework .............................. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of Research Question ........................................ 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposed Framework for Understanding Migration at Mexico's Southern Border ........................................ 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review ...................................................... 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II. Mexico's Border and Policies ..................................... 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Characteristics ............................................... 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Complexity of Mexican Borders ...................................... 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III. Central American Migration in Transit Through Mexico .............. 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central American Migration ........................................... 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent Trends of Central American Migration ................................ 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organized Crime ....................................................... 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widespread Poverty ..................................................... 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Reunification .................................................. 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTCA Seeking Asylum .................................................. 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migrants at High Risk ................................................ 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Migrants ........................................................ 26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

Table 1. Central American Migration ................................................................. 16
Table 2. Migration Indicators, 2009 and 2016 ..................................................... 17
Table 3. Adult Migrants in Mexico: Apprehensions, Asylum Applications, and
Grants of Asylum, 2013-2017 ........................................................................ 23
Table 4. Child Migration in Mexico: Apprehensions, Asylum Applications, and
Grants of Asylum, 2013-2017 ........................................................................ 24
List of Figures

Figure 1. Southern Border of Mexico ................................................................. 11

Figure 2. Belts of Control on the Southern Border of Mexico ......................... 30
Chapter I.

Mexico’s Southern Border Framework

The journey for many unauthorized migrants in Mexico follows various pathways beginning in countries in Central America and extending throughout Mexico en route to the United States. It is fraught with violence. Primarily, migrants attempting this journey are coming from the Northern Triangle of Central America, which includes Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. This migration phenomenon has been referred to as an “invisible refugee crisis” (Lakhani, 2016) due to the lack of awareness it has received versus other higher profile crisis, such as those found in the United States-Mexico border. However, my thesis is interested in exploring the complex nature of Mexico’s southern border. This thesis seeks to answer the following question: Why has Mexico’s programs and plans failed to regulate migration and protect migrant human rights?

To answer the following question, this thesis identifies Central American migration movements to the United States through Mexico. An evaluation of the southern border of Mexico and migration routes follows. This thesis then presents an analysis of Mexico’s immigration enforcement policies to illustrate the compound challenges that Mexico faces while attempting to regulate migration from the NTCA.

For the purpose of this thesis, the term “illegal immigrants” will be replaced with “unauthorized immigrants” because “illegal” reduces a group of human beings to an “other” or an enemy. The term “unauthorized” will replace “illegal” to describe a person who enters, lives in or works in the United States without proper authorization.
Nevertheless, unauthorized immigration links the northern and southern borders of Mexico; however, border management policies, models, and means vary considerably from one border to the other (Garcia, 2011). For instance, on the northern border, the U.S, has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure, technology, and the number of border patrol agents has tripled recently. By contrast, the southern border budget fell from $3.1 million in 2015 to around $1.6 million in 2016, according to the Secretariat of the Interior. Factors, such as socioeconomic inequality, globalization and free trade between the North and South, United States homeland security policies, and the increase of NTCA migration have captured the Mexican government’s attention (Giron, 2019). Similarly, global concerns about organized, crime, violence, human rights abuses, unaccompanied children and the Central American migrant caravan have dominated media attention in Mexico and the United States. In view of this, the Mexican government reacted by implementing different types of versions of Programas Frontera Sur (PFS) (Mexico’s Southern Border Programs) to manage its southern border and regulate unauthorized immigration. For instance, it developed operations such as “Sellamiento” in 1998, “Plan Sur” in 2001, “Propuesta de Política Migratoria en la Frontera Sur de México in 2005”, “Plan de Reordenamiento del la Frontera Sur” in 2006 and “Plan Frontera Sur” (PFS) in 2014.

An examination of these earlier policies implemented at the southern border of Mexico is provided to make a comparison between prior strategies and PFS in order to find the gaps between the implementation and execution process.

Operación Sellamiento was implemented by former President Ernesto Zedillo to stop the flow of drugs at Mexico’s borders and its coasts (Yucatán Peninsula, Baja
California, Gulf of Mexico, Pacific coast). As many as 22,000 agents from the military, the Federal Police, and the Attorney’s General Office were involved. “Attainments made under Operación Sellamiento have made it possible to combat other crimes that happen through the most porous border in our territory” (Castillo, 2001). The assertion emphasizes that “other crimes” may have involved controlling undocumented migration (Giron, 2013).

*Plan Sur* (2001-2002) was originally spearheaded by Vicente Fox to enhance border management and migration checkpoints along the Gulf of Mexico, Pacific coast and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Casillas, 2002). The operational goal was to combine efforts among different agencies and municipal and state governments to manage unauthorized migrant flows. As well as, utilizing the resourced of el Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) regional offices to oversee migrants, and boost the number of apprehended migrants and detention of people involved in human trafficking (Casillas 2016, p. 20-21).

In addition, *Propuesta de Política Migratoria en la Frontera Sur de Mexico* implemented by the Fox administration to a) “Facilitate authorized temporary and permanent immigration to southern border states, b) protect the rights of migrants who traverse the southern border, c) address security matters at the southern border, and d) update management and immigration legislation according to the characteristics of migration populations at the southern border” (INM, 2005).

*Plan de Reordenamiento del la Frontera Sur* was executed by former President Felipe Calderón to regulate migration and security at the border. However, the plan never started, because no concrete steps were implemented to enforce it.
Lastly, PFS (Southern Border Program), was developed by former President Enrique Peña Nieto to address migration issues at the southern border of Mexico and to enrich the economic and social development of the 23 municipalities next to Guatemala. (PFS is furthered examine in chapter three).

Overall, these earlier policies implemented at the southern border region lasted no more than two years (with the exception of PFS) and resources apportioned to these policies fell under security measures. These programs had limited impact on the ground due to ephemeral policy efforts.

Significance of Research Question

This thesis seeks to explore the historical phenomenon of Central American migration, the complexity of Mexico’s southern border, and the reasons for the failure of programs implemented by three different administrations to regulate and protect migration flows. A brief evaluation of Mexico’s newly elected President will also be provided to determine if migration is a top priority for the administration.

This research is conducted to illuminate an area devoid of significant attention to address the dangerous journey that migrants confront in Mexico’s neglected border. Given the current socio-political climate in the NTCA, particularly with respect to targeted violence, corruption and impunity (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Amnesty International, 2016), the trends are changing where we are increasingly observing a growing number of migrants from the NTCA seeking a new beginning in the United States. Despite these growing numbers of migrants, and concerns from United Nation (UN) agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGO’s) about their protection along this route, this migration remains understudied.
Theoretically, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of academic discourse on Mexico’s southern borders by identifying the issue areas in which Mexico needs to fully cooperate and coordinate with various international actors to protect migrants’ human rights.

Proposed Framework for Understanding Migration at Mexico’s Southern Border

In order to grasp the phenomenon of migration at Mexico’s southern border four main themes are presented: Migration from the NTCA, the southern border of Mexico, plans and programs to regulate migration, and efforts to secure migrants rights. A systematic approach is required to identify the encompassing whole, the explanation of the behavior and properties of the complete system.

An analysis is provided, because the focus of this study is to explain why the Mexican government’s plans and programs have failed to regulate migration on the southern border. It allows an in-depth investigation of issue and the identification of economic, social, security and political factors related to the phenomenon of interest. The analysis is conducted exclusively through secondary data analysis and documentary research. The secondary data sources used are from El Instituto Nacional de Migracion de Mexico (INM) (Mexican National Migration Institute), U.S. Customs and Border Protection, NGO’s, international organizations, such as the World Bank, The United Nations, and the International Organization for Migration. This information includes statistics about the NTCA migration in all phases, organized crime, and human rights abuses. Documents included are government reports, journals, NGO’s reports, newspapers articles, and books on Mexico’s southern border.
This analysis covers the period from 2000 to present to provide a clear understanding of the phenomenon. The analysis includes the Vicente Fox administration from 2000-2006, the Felipe Calderon administration from 2006-2012, Enrique Peña-Nieto administration from 2012-2018 and the current administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO).

**Literature Review**

Most of the research on the southern border of Mexico has focused on its historical evolution and poor condition, and the characterization of legal and unauthorized flows across the border. The current threats along this border are human trafficking, drug trafficking, weapons smuggling and unauthorized immigration (Comisión Sur Sureste, 2011).

Similarly, the southern border of Mexico is vulnerable for several reasons: the lack of doctrine and training of the use of law enforcement and armed forces tasks, the weak presence of the state and, the trans-nationality of organized crime and unauthorized immigration, and corruption in the security, political, and administrative branches of government (Musalo, 2015). Threats and vulnerabilities are part of the puzzle to explain why the state’s plans and programs have fall short to control the southern border of Mexico and to regulate immigration.

The literature is divided into four parts: Mexico’s borders, Mexico’s policies, NTC migration and threats along the southern border of Mexico.
Chapter II.
Mexico’s Border and Policies

While the United States border policies typically tend to be the focal point of research, more scholarly focus should also be allocated to border practices in Mexico because the Mexican State assists the United States in border enforcement and represents an added barrier for migrants trying to move north. In their journey, migrants from the NTCA must cross the Guatemala-Mexico border to reach the United States as well as the states in between where la migra officials (Mexican authorities) can detain, apprehend and deport migrants. Border policies in Mexico are very violent and restrictive. Since the latest iteration of border security policy, PFS, Mexican officials are currently detaining and deporting migrants in record numbers (Figures displayed in the following section).

Mexico, however, has always had a complex history with respect to migration. Migration policies are defined as regulations and measures that administrations describe and execute with the purpose of controlling immigration flows. Mexico’s first attempt to regulate migration was in the beginning of the twentieth century the legislation on migration was consolidated with the first General Law of Migration of 1908 (Muñoz, 2014). Under this law people who had the following characteristics were prevented to enter Mexican territory; the sick, mentally ill, anarchists, minors under 16, beggars, fugitives from justice, prostitutes and those who depended on public charity. The Second Law of Migration of 1926 established that individuals who could read and write, or demonstrated evidences of a contractual labor relations in the case of migrant workers, could immigrate to the country.
In 1947, the Second General Law of the Population was issued. The law had similar content concerning the entrance of foreigners into the country. Three decades later, in 1974, the Third General Law of Population was issued through which restricting quotas limited the entrance of immigrants and the need for programs with a better distribution of the population was visualized, considering the possibilities of development in diverse regions of the country based on natural resource potential. More importantly, the law provided a significant degree of administrative discretion to government officials.

Despite the visible role of Mexico’s migration policies in the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s, migration was still perceived as an afterthought within the Mexican government. The status quo changed in the 1980s, as three developments reoriented Mexican public policy in the area of migration: Mexico’s 1982 economic crisis, enactment in the United States of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986, the inflow of Central Americans seeking refuge from that region’s civil wars, and a drive toward economic liberalization and, eventually, North American economic integration (Muñoz, 2014).

Historically, the southern border areas of Mexico had maintained close economic relations with the border regions of Guatemala and Belize; cross-border flows of goods and people were common, and the region was widely considered an integrated economic entity. However, the border gained a practical importance as civil wars erupted in Guatemala and other parts of Central America. Between 1981 and 1983, an estimated 200,000 Guatemalans sought refuge in Mexico (Muñoz, 2014). For the most part, Guatemalan refugees remained in Mexico’s southern border states, but many eventually settled and remained in Mexico after the return of democracy to Guatemala in 1983 and
the end of violence in 1996. When peace returned to the region, the cross-border economic activity that characterized the prewar period resumed and intensified. Following the recommendations of bilateral consultations between the Mexican and Guatemalan governments, Mexico instituted a series of reforms to facilitate and legalize these cross-border movements. In 1989 the Mexican government created short-term multiple-entry visitor visas allowing Guatemalans residing in border regions to enter Mexico’s southern border region (Muñoz, 2014). In 1997 these visas were expanded to include agricultural workers and in 2008 to include general laborers. Mexico’s policy of normalizing cross-border flows faced new challenges when the humanitarian and local movements from Guatemala and other Central American countries into Mexico began to incorporate themselves, in much larger flows, into the same migratory route as Mexicans towards the United States. Central Americans who had settled in southern Mexico increasingly accompanied Mexicans on the journey to the United States. Around the same time and in the context of preparations for the entry into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Mexican government adjusted its provisions governing legal immigration. In response to the growing flow of Central Americans, Mexico expanded the sanctions associated with irregular entry into Mexico and increased the requirements for the granting of tourist visas for nationals of various Latin American countries, including Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua (Muñoz, 2014). Mexican consulates accredited to these countries began asking that Central Americans seeking to visit Mexico demonstrate economic solvency. Moreover, although Mexican law had provisions for transit visas, Mexican authorities in Central American began requiring that Central Americans transiting through Mexico hold a valid
visa to enter their final destination. These measures were clearly designed to stem the flow of Central Americans northward, but instead encouraged Central Americans to enter Mexico via irregular channels and to rely more on human smugglers (Muñoz, 2014).

Prior to the last quarter of the 20th century, Central American migration was seen as an intraregional phenomenon: local cross-border movements were common but longer-distance movements were rare, until more recently when direct violence and exploitation became more systematic and inescapable in the NTCA.

General Characteristics

Mexico’s southern border is 1,139 kilometers in length; a 952-kilometer stretch of its southern border is with Guatemala and 176 kilometers with Belize. Of the 172 holding facilities that Mexico has, 48 are along its southern border (Sawe, 2018).

Mexico is bordered by the United States to the north and Guatemala and Belize to the southeast. There are 11 border crossings between Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico with only one linking Mexico to Belize (Sawe, 2018). The Mexico- U.S. border is one of the most crossed borders globally with both legal and unauthorized immigrants.

The Suchiate River marks the southwestern part of the border between Mexico (State of Chiapas) and Guatemala (department of San Marcos) and is one of the principal crossings for migrants in an irregular situation entering Mexico. Many Central American migrants use this form of crossing to enter Mexico from Guatemala. This is one of the preferred crossing points used by migrants coming to Mexico without proper documentation. The bulk of migrants entering Mexico do so by land, across Mexico's southern border with Guatemala; they tend to gravitate to certain crossing points in the States of Tabasco and Chiapas (Sawe, 2018).
The dynamics on the Mexico-Guatemalan region vary according to the characteristics of the region. The Mexican border states are Quintana Roo, Tabasco, Chiapas and Campeche. In Guatemala the border states are San Marcos, Quiché, Huehuetenango, Petén and Alta Verapaz. For instance, Campeche is mostly composed of rainforest which halts most of formal crossings endeavors. However, the construction of the expressway from El Naranjo to El Ciebo, on the border with Tabasco, intensified unauthorized immigration (INM, 2011). Chiapas is the main state for the entry, transit and deportation of Central American unauthorized immigrants.

Figure 1. Southern Border of Mexico.


Furthermore, the Mexico- Belize border, according to Ana Cervera Molina is described as an "insular region characterized by its porosity and cultural distinctiveness with Mexico and the rest of Central America". The point of entry between both countries is a bridge in the city of Chetumal. Local tourists and visitors comprise the volume of migration flow. Therefore, the relationship between both countries is essentially commerce (INM, 2011).
Before 2009, Belizeans were required to obtain a visa or a consular stamp to travel as a tourist or in transit through Mexican territory. However, the Mexican government lifted those restrictions to strengthen the commerce between both countries. Former PR Officer for the Mexican Embassy, Marcello Miranda indicated “The idea for Mexico is to strengthen the relationship to facilitate the trade and the exchange with Belize and especially to facilitate the free movement of people between both countries. Mexicans don’t need a visa to come to Belize and we thought that was unbalanced. In a fair relation we think that it is not fair that Mexicans don’t need a visa and that is the reason Mexico is honoring now an agreement of the elimination of visa between both countries” (7News Belize, 2009). Now Belizeans are just required to present a valid Belizean passport and fill out the immigration form called “Forma Migratoria Múltiple”. However if a Belizean visitor stays more than seven consecutive days in Mexico, a fee of about $265 pesos is charged.

The Complexity of Mexican Borders

The priorities for the management and security of the Mexican borders are organized crime and migration; however, no consensus exists about the best strategy to face these challenges. Jorge L. Hidalgo Catellanos argues that all three levels of governments, academic institutions, civil societies, human rights organizations and neighboring countries need to partake in the analysis and development of programs and plans for the comprehensive development of the border areas. He indicates that factors are already in motion for the management of the southern border of Mexico, but they are not meshed. Castellanos links the absence of a thorough risk assessment of the southern border of Mexico and the uncoordinated application of related plans and policies.
Likewise, Luis Herrera- Lasso explains that the policy of Mexico for the control of borders and the related laws are restrictive but not applied. For instance, Mexico and Guatemala have ten official ports of entry. The three main crossing sites are *La Mesilla, Tecun Uman, and El Carmen*. More importantly, this border region has more than 370 unofficial and informal crossings. Due to low population density in the bordering states, Mexico has chosen to focus border security controls in the border states interior (Borders). Furthermore, existing laws with no authority to enforce them have open the door for human rights violations and corruption, that create cash flow for migration officials and criminals
Chapter III.

Central American Migration in Transit through Mexico

The objective of this chapter is to describe the characteristics that make Mexico a transit country for migrants. These elements are relevant to understand the importance of NTCA migration and the impact it has on Mexico.

Mexico’s location is between the developing and developed countries, connecting the United States from Latin America. Unauthorized immigrants from Central and South America, and even from East Europe and Asia, attempt to reach the United States through Mexico, using the same routes and services as Mexican migrants (González, 2013).

Central American Migration

During the beginning of 1960, Mexico’s migration policy was based on the protection of the labor market for the domestic workforce, allowing the entrance of migrants who could prove economic solvency (Kimbal, 2007). For instance, most of the Central Americans from the Northern triangle entered Mexico with little to no money, but their willingness to work proved that they were solvent, due to cheap labor (since thousands of Mexicans were migrating to the United States leaving a labor gap in agriculture). "The growth of coffee plantations and other economic activities in the 1960s and 1970s demanded a large workforce, especially at harvest season, generating an extended labor market that was fulfilled by Central American temporary workers" and unauthorized immigrants (Villafuerte, 2007). Until the 1970s, internal or regional movements of a temporal character and economic purpose defined Central American
migration; however, civil wars, ethnic cleansing, and political violence from 1974 to 1996 changed those patterns, producing internal displacements and forced migration.

The first Central Americans to arrive in Mexico were the Nicaraguans, who migrated to the United States in the 1970s, escaping the Somoza dictatorship and the Sandinista War. The second group of Central Americans seeking refuge in Mexico began to arrive in 1981, of approximately 200,000, Guatemalans escaping from state-led massacres. (Castillo, 2006). After peace was reconstructed in the 1990s, many of them went back to their country, although around 20,000 remained in Mexico as legal residents (Insulza, Ramin, Tross 2012). The next migrants were Salvadorans, who fled their country from the civil war between the Frente Farabundo Martí Para La Liberación Nacional and state forces. The presence of Central Americans in Mexico had unexpected results, including the militarization of the southern border region, the steam of smugglers, and the establishment of routes and social networks of future unauthorized migration (Kimbal, 2007).

After the governments from the NTCA signed the peace accords to bring greater political freedom and enter into indirect negotiation with rebel leaders, the social and economic relations across borders between Central America and Mexico were resumed and augmented. Mexico implemented several programs to advance the economic involvement of border neighbors, such as visas for agricultural workers, resident permits, and day laborer visas (Alba, Castillo, 2012).

In sum, Central American migration historically has been mostly associated with poorly performing economies within the context of globalization as well as the legacies
of repression and civil war (Orozco, 2018). The southern border of Mexico can be exhibited in four different types of migration periods:

1. Pre-1970: predominantly intra-regional mobility;
2. 1970-1990: conflict-related migration, escaping from civil war, repression and military rule
3. 1990-2000: economic transition and global labor demand related migration;
4. 2000-present: Mix of economic and security-related flows of people (Orozco, 2018)

The table below displays the increase of Central Migration practically doubling within a span of fifteen years.

Table 1. Central American Migration.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2015</th>
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<tr>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>2,612,081</td>
<td>4,053,637</td>
<td>4,173,997</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Recent Trends of Central American Migration

The NTCA is considered a region severely affected by violence and insecurity associated with organized crime groups. Based on the most recent statistics by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in 2015, El Salvador had the highest national homicide rate in the world at approximately 109 homicides for every 100,000 people. In 2015, Honduras had the second highest rate, with an estimate of 64 homicides for every
100,000 people. In 2014, Guatemala reported a rate of 31 homicides for every 100,000, ranking in the 10 highest rates that year (Takemoto, 2019).

The magnitude of the NTCA migration is measured by considering the number of people who are apprehended along the Mexico and United States border as well as those who eventually enter. However, there are still large numbers of people who attempt to leave their country but remain in transit trying to enter the United States (Orozco, 2018).

The table below displays figures from 2009 and 2016 from a survey compiled by The Inter-American Dialogue to illustrate the rapid increase in migration from the NTCA, by focusing on annual migration, deportations, apprehensions from the Mexican and United States government.

Table 2. Migration Indicators, 2009 and 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>El Salvador</th>
<th>Guatemala</th>
<th>Honduras</th>
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<tr>
<td>Annual migration</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>61,000</td>
<td>43,485</td>
<td>50,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>39,037</td>
<td>62,750</td>
<td>59,555</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deportations</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>17,947</td>
<td>23,430</td>
<td>19,501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>20,538</td>
<td>35,465</td>
<td>21,944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprehensions at Mexico border</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>35,390</td>
<td>83,745</td>
<td>58,814</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprehensions at US Border</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>29,911</td>
<td>39,050</td>
<td>32,501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>51,200</td>
<td>66,982</td>
<td>42,433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Estimates based on IAD’s methodology to measure migration, accompanied by DHS and DOS visa statistics, and World Bank indicators.
Furthermore, according to the International Migration Report (2017), around 1.5 million migrants from the NTCA currently live in the United States and the table above indicates that NTCA migration has increased sharply over the years. The recent increase of migration is mainly caused by violence, widespread poverty and family reunification. However, these components are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, as migrant may leave the NTCA for a combination of these factors or other reasons. Furthermore, the assessment of these factors will help to acknowledge that not all migration flows are the same, and they have to be regulated according to their causes.

Organized Crime

Violence and Crime in Central America have multiple players, but none appears more responsible for the dramatic increase in violence than the illegal drug trade. The World Bank noted in 2011 that drug trafficking constitutes “he main single factor behind rising levels of violence in the region,” indicating that crime rates are more than 100 percent higher in drug trafficking “hot spots” than in other areas (Arnston & Olson, 2011). The growing activity of organized crime groups in Central America, particularly drug traffickers, takes advantage of the regions weak and fragile institutions as well as its geographical proximity to North American drug markets. While there is significant variation among the countries of the region, in most cases dysfunctional judicial systems have long fostered high levels of impunity and corruption (Arnston et al., 2011). Processes of police reform and professionalization in the wake of peace settlements in Guatemala and El Salvador have been incomplete. The region’s porous land borders and extensive coastlines are not adequately controlled, making them vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups (Arnston et al., 2011). “Criminal networks, including
some originating during the era of internal armed conflict have operated in Central America for decades (moving drugs, contraband, arms, and human beings)” (Arnston et al., 2011).

Furthermore, Mexican organized crime networks have historically maintained a foothold in Central America, but their presence continued to expand, as Central America became a more important transshipment point between the Andes and Mexico. According to the U.S. government, an estimated half of the illicit drugs entering the U.S. through Mexico stop first in Central America. However, the presence of Mexican Transnational Organized Crime Groups (TOCGs) in Central America has created considerable havoc to the fragile Central American states. The most popular TOCGs are the Zetas and Sinaloa Federation. Estimations stipulate that 78 percent of Guatemala is under control of the Zeta cartel, with the Sinaloa federation present along Guatemalan borders with El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico. In Guatemala, homicide rates are higher around the capital and El Peten, two areas under the Mexican cartel’s influence. In the case of Honduras rates are higher along the Atlantic coast and the Guatemalan border, which are vital routes for drug trafficking. The combination of local gangs and Mexican TOCGs is part of the reason the NTCA has three of the five highest homicides rates in the world (Arnston et al., 2011).

The Central American gangs known as the Maras, composed of youth, partake in illegal activities such as drug trafficking, kidnapping, robberies, homicides, weapon smuggling and extortion. Maras have power on the southern border of the region and have dominance of part of the railroad route departing from Chiapas to the U.S.-Mexico border. They have an agreement with the Zetas to operate in this part of the route.
Instilling fear and insecurity is the approach gangs use to control the vulnerable communities. The feeling of insecurity produced by the high possibility of losing a child to gang violence, the rape of a daughter or constantly being exposed to violence are more than enough incentives to migrate to a new place or country.

Widespread Poverty

Poverty and the lack of opportunities to enhance people’s lives are factors that also drive migration from the NTCA through Mexico to the U.S. Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are the poorest countries in Latin America. According to The Borgen Project, about 66 percent of Hondurans, 35 percent of Salvadorans, and 59 percent of Guatemalans are living in poverty. Approximately 60 percent of the Northern Triangle’s rural population continues to live below their countries’ poverty lines (Leutert, 2018). A lack of investment in human capital, limited access to secondary education, and high levels of youth unemployment have all compounded existing hardships. According to the United States Congressional Research Service, an estimated 25 percent of 15-24 years old in El Salvador and Honduras do not study or work, and Guatemala has the lowest rate of graduation from high school less than 45 percent. Many Central Americans seek economic and educational opportunities in the United State to obtain jobs that pay ten times more. For example, a worker in an informal or unauthorized job in the United States could earn between $41 to $100 per day (depending on the state), whereas, in El Salvador a coffee worker earns approximately US$7.44 per day (Leutert, 2018). The opportunity to earn higher wages in the United States combined with the lack of economic opportunities in the NTCA is another factor driving migration through Mexico.
Family Reunification

Decades of irregular and legal migration from the NTCA to the United States have separated families, with little to no hope for reunification. Irregular immigrants are unable to bring relatives or children to join them in the United States through legal channels, while legal permanent residents struggle with the lengthy paperwork, delays opaque bureaucracy, and hefty fees involved in the formal United States immigration system. In response to these legal barriers along with other factors such as recent United States immigration policies, limited education and economic opportunities, and family reunification (Leutert, 2018), in 2014 the number of unaccompanied children at the Mexico-US border for attempting to cross without legal documents rose dramatically to almost 68,000. The United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported a surge in the number of children from the NTCA from approximately 1,000 per nation in 2009 to between 16,000 and 18,000 per nation in 2014, and high numbers from Mexico averaging close to 15,000 per year.

Furthermore, the recent enforcement of United States immigration policy under the Donald Trump administration has made conditions difficult for all immigrants. As a consequence, more unauthorized immigrants have settled rather than return home after working temporary in the US. These structural conditions drive “the desire for family reunification” (Leutert, 2018).

NTCA Seeking Asylum

According to The Department of Homeland Security, asylum claims from NTCA immigrants from 2012 to 2017, have gone from 8,519 to 76,023, an increase of 892 percent (Safe Third Countries for Asylum-Seekers, 2017). In contrast, Mexico asylum
applications are lower than the United States due to significant barriers preventing
migrants, including children, from obtaining the right to seek asylum in Mexico. Some of
these barriers are the following:

1. “Many migrants are arbitrarily detained in poor conditions in processing
facilities upon apprehension. In these facilities, migrants lack access to legal
counsel and opportunities to have their cases heard. Child migrants are being
systematically detained, which violated their basic human rights” (2017).

2. “Adult and child migrants in need of international protection are not often
‘informed about their rights or screened for international protection concerns as is
required by Mexican law’ (2017). This is concerning because a person only has
thirty business days upon entering Mexican territory to file an asylum
application” (Safe Third Countries for Asylum-Seekers 2017).

By law, the INM must inform any person they detain or stop of their right to seek
asylum in Mexico and send those who express their intention to apply for asylum to the
Comision Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR). Amnesty International
discovered that 75% of migrants detained in immigration centers are misinformed by
INM officers about their rights to seek asylum. Instead of being carefully listened to,
more than half of the people spent less than 10 minutes in interviews. In several cases
documented by Amnesty International (2017), even when the migrant explicitly asked to
seek asylum and expressed fear for their life in their home country, they were ignored and
ultimately deported. As a Honduran migrant who was forcibly recruited as an orphan at
age 13 and has received threats by gangs for fleeing said: “I’ve been deported 27 times
from Mexico. The Mexican migration agents don’t care why you are leaving your county.
They make fun of you” (Amnesty International, 2018).

Table 3 illustrates the factors that reflect the low number of asylum applications
in contrast with the higher number of apprehended migrants. Further, there is a very low
rate of success on asylum application in Mexico, as displayed by the charts below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total apprehensions</th>
<th>Asylum applicants from the NTCA</th>
<th>Granted protection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>76,668</td>
<td>1,296 (887)</td>
<td>313 (242)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>104,053</td>
<td>2,137 (1,769)</td>
<td>536 (477)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>159,627</td>
<td>3,424 (3,138)</td>
<td>1,102 (1,015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>146,102</td>
<td>8,796 (8,059)</td>
<td>3,205 (2,808)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>77,197</td>
<td>14,596 (8,656)</td>
<td>1,907 (958)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>563,647</td>
<td>30,249 (22,509)</td>
<td>7,063 (5,500)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mexican Commission for the Assistance of Refugees (COMAR).

As shown in Table 4 Mexican officials have been ramping up deportations of all irregular migrants, including children, from the NTCA countries with little regard for due process. This practice is called refoulment and its forbidden under the refugee convention by the UNHCR, which has been signed by several countries, including Mexico. The INM diverts the law by claiming that migrant have signed a “voluntary return” paper. However, Amnesty International reported that many migrants indicated that they were frequently pressured into signing the paper. A 23-year-old Honduran man stated: “The INM official in the detention center said ‘if you don’t sign here, we won’t give you food,
you won’t be able to have a shower. We will treat you like you don’t exist” (Amnesty International, 2018).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total apprehensions of Children</th>
<th>Children applicants for asylum from the NTCA</th>
<th>Children NT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>9,630</td>
<td>63 (55)</td>
<td>18 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>23,096</td>
<td>78 (75)</td>
<td>22 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>38,514</td>
<td>142 (139)</td>
<td>44 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>40,114</td>
<td>8,796 (8,059)</td>
<td>102 (102)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>18,300</td>
<td>242 (229)</td>
<td>36 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>129,654</td>
<td>784 (734)</td>
<td>222 (214)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Safe Third Countries for Asylum-Seekers 2017

In sum, migrants often lack sufficient protections while in Mexico: in transiting through the country to arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border, they suffer violence and other abuses at the hands of organized crime and corrupt migration officials (WOLA, 2017). Further, there is a lack of justice for crimes against migrants, which allows for crimes to remain in impunity and only serves to foster their repetition: between 2014 and 2016, “of
the 5,284 violations against NTCA migrants reported in Oaxaca, Coahuila, Sonora, Tabasco, Chiapas and at the federal level, there is evidence of only 49 sentences, leaving 99 percent of the cases in impunity” (WOLA, 2017).

Migrants at High Risk

Over the past few decades, there has been a shift in characteristics of who is arriving at the border and the underlying reasons for making the decision to migration. Unlike the typical border crosser who tended to be male seeking employment, NTCA women are now making the journey alone or with their children to escape the violence in their country, along with other subgroups (Fleury, 2016). These subgroups may face higher risks during their journey due to their gender, age and sexual orientation.

For instance women and unaccompanied children are one of the most high-risk migrant groups (Fleury, 2016). Women face extreme hardship on the journey northward, as they experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence, and are victimized by smugglers, cartels, gangs and authorities. Thus, unaccompanied children become very vulnerable because they are alone without anyone to look after them, face age discrimination and are often recruited by criminals.

From October 2011 to October 2014, the number of unaccompanied minors crossing into Mexico and the U.S. increased in the summer of 2014 during a period known as “the surge.” From 2011 to 2016, there was a 446 percent increase in the number of unaccompanied minors deported by Mexican officials and a 272 percent increase in unaccompanied minors apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border (Alcaraz, 2013) (as shown in Table 4).
Women Migrants

Despite the growing number of women migrant, their experiences remain understudied and it is difficult to estimate the total number of women migrants from the NTCA due to vast underreporting. However, women from the NTCA have reported injecting themselves with contraceptives prior to embarking north in order to avoid getting pregnant. Girls and Women may also become victims of coerced survival sex, in which they are forced by a smuggler, police officer, migration official, or another migrant to exchange sex for shelter, protection, food, or ability to proceed. Organizations that assist migrants in Mexico have also documented cases of smugglers pressuring women and girls into sex as payment and threatening to abandon them if they say no.

Additionally, since 2012, Mexican authorities apprehended 11,336 women, while in 2017 30,541 women were apprehended according to INM.

LGBTQI Migrants

Migrants within the LGBTQI community are particularly susceptible to both sexual and physical violence at home and in transit. Each NTCA country has high rates of violence against LGBTQI people (Kinosian, 2019). According to the Honduran rights group Cattrachas, at least 264 LGBTQI people have been killed in Honduras since 2009, the majority of them gay men. In Guatemala, conservatism and violence contribute to lesbians being subject to rape as “punishment” for their orientation. LGBTQI Salvadorans suffer from systematic discrimination and violence from law enforcement at home, the majority of cases resulting in impunity. They face similar challenges in Mexico while seeking asylum (Kinosian, 2018).
It is difficult to obtain representative figures for sexual violence against LGBTQI migrants in transit given the fear, guilt, and shame associated with sexual assault. Yet in 2016 and 2017 the UNHCR reported that two-thirds of the LGBTQI refugees they spoke with had suffered sexual and gender-based violence in Mexico.
Chapter IV.
The Southern Border of Mexico

The aim of this chapter is to describe Mexico’s southern border migration routes throughout the southern region, a platform for migration, and detention centers along the southern border to understand the fragile infrastructures.

The establishment of Mexico’s southern border began during the 1800s when Guatemala and Mexico solidified their independence. However, the border between the countries was under debate because, until 1824, Chiapas was part of Guatemala. In 1882, the new border separated the territories of Mexico and Guatemala, but it did not divide the social, cultural, ethnic, and economic ties between both countries.

The development of border control carried on during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the discovery of economic and natural resources in Chiapas. During this time, coffee plantations in the Soconusco province grew dramatically, producing significant migration of Guatemalan workers to the region.

According to Ann Kimbal, the southern border region during the twentieth century was not very visible, because border management did not exist, regional trade was strong, and social relations took priority beyond identity or nationality. Given, the development of the border the Mexican administrations began to consider the southern border of the region a matter of national security in response to domestic and international issues.

Domestically, in 2006 Mexico declared the war against organized crime, the emergence of guerillas as the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) and interest in the economic integration of North America, shaped the restrictive militarization of the
southern border of the country. Internationally, Mexico was dealing with a refugee crisis from Central America due to civil wars, an increase of unauthorized migration of Central Americans to the United States and intense United States border security policies after the 9/11 terrorist attack.

The civil wars in Central America resulted in mass migration to Mexico, and even though a large number of refugees returned back to their countries, they left lasting bonds that aid in the development of drug trafficking, movement of unauthorized immigrants, and smuggling of weapons. However, the issue that triggered restrictive control of the border was the uprising of the EZLN in 1994. The Zapatista rebellion compelled the government to militarize the southern border of the country with an increase in military bases in Chiapas, and with the establishment of Advanced Naval Stations (ENAs) along the Rio Hondo and Suchiate rivers. Consequently, as a result of the 9/11 terrorits attack, the U.S. pressured Mexico to strengthen controls over its southern border. With these restrictions, Central American migrants adapted coercive tactics, establishing more dangerous and isolated migration routes and more frequently using the service of professional smugglers to cross Mexico.

Border Infrastructure

The infrastructures design to regulate immigration flow on the southern border of Mexico consists of legal Points of Entry (POEs), mobile and border checkpoints, security agencies and patrols of migration. The second one is located about thirty miles from the border and includes posts on the main roads crossing through Trinitaria, Arriaga, Huixtla, Suchiate, Comitan, Palenque, and Benemerito de las Americas. The last layer is located at about one hundred miles, and the third is placed along the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.
Checkpoints are located at the main highways heading north, hindering the transit of unauthorized immigrants through the southern region of Mexico.

Different agencies participate in the operation of the checkpoints for the regulation of unauthorized immigration; however, coordination is absent, and the functions of these posts and the resources employed are duplicated. For instance Mexico and Guatemala have ten official POEs: El Ceibo, Tabasco; Frontera Corozal, Carmen Chan, Ciudad Cuauhtémoc-Las Champsas, Unión Juárez, Talismán, Suchiate II, and Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, are administered by diverse agencies. The agencies with checkpoints include the Federal Attorney General's Office, Federal Police, the Army the Navy, the Chiapas State Police, INM, and Customs. Checkpoints are located at the main highway heading north, hindering the transit of unauthorized immigrants through the southern region of Mexico.

![Figure 2. Belts of Control on the Southern Border of Mexico.](https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Mexicos-Other-Border-PDF.pdf)
Detention Centers

Another infrastructure implemented to aid in the regulation of migration flow at the southern border of Mexico are detention centers. The Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM), a unit of the government of Mexico that controls and supervises migration in the country, established 32 of these centers throughout Mexico. Furthermore, 15 estancias provisionales (provisional centers) for the detention of migrants for a maximum of 48 hours, and 12 estaciones migratorias (migratory stations) for a maximum of seven days. However, language in Mexican law about migration detention is vague: migrants are “presentados” (presented) at detention centers, that are administered by the INM, where they are “alojados temporalmente” (temporary housed) until their stay in Mexico is “regularized” or before they are returned to their country of origin. Depending on the migrant’s citizenship, the removal proceedings can take between two days, which is the case for most Central Americans unless they are requesting some form of protection, which can range between several weeks or even months. Under the Mexican law, a migrant can be held for up to 60 working days. This can be extended indefinitely due to several factors including difficulties in obtaining identification documents, consular delays, or health problems, among others. Migrants who leave their country due to political or safety reasons, might spend a significant amount of time in detention waiting for an “documentación de salida” (exit documentation) granting the individual the possibility to remain in Mexico for a period of 20 days (many of these migrants ultimately make their way to the United States border.

The largest migrant detention centers in Mexico is, Siglo XXI in Tapachula, Chiapas, with the capacity of 960 migrants. Because of its location, Siglo XXI is the main
point of departure for Central American who have been detained in the Chiapas, Mexico. The other detention centers are in Acayuca Veracruz, with capacity for 836 persons, and Iztapalapa in the Federal District, with a capacity for 450 persons. As a result of increased enforcement in Mexico under the latest version of the Southern Border Program, Siglo XXI is consistently at or above capacity, holding a vast number of NTCA migrants.

According to migrant testimonies obtained by the Fray Matias de Cordova Human Rights Center, due to overcrowding at Siglo XXI, migrant dormitories are over capacity, migrants wait long periods of time to obtain food, and cleanings of bed sheets and bathrooms are insufficiently frequent, among other problems. One Honduran migrant who spent three months in Siglo XXI indicated, “During my stay here I witnessed all type of violations that happen here. All laws have been broken without care and no one in the Mexican government seems to be interested. Here you don’t have any rights. Here you are not even a human. That’s how everyone is treated, no matter where you are from. Here you are a trash bag, getting the worst medical treatment and getting the worst food.”

Migrant Route

Mexico's efforts to combat migration permanently changed the reality of transmigrants. These efforts drove migrants out of the public eye and marginalized them to some of the most dangerous areas in Mexico. Without free access to roadways, migrants have resorted to different and inhospitable means of transport to reach the U.S. border, including the long clambered aboard aging cargo trains known as “La Bestia” (The Beast). This train heads northward to central Mexico and then on to the U.S. border for hundreds of miles, while migrants ride on the roofs of the train trying to avoid fatal falls.
La Bestia is the last-resort transportation for the most indigent travelers, who pay gangs, corrupt officials, municipal police or railroad employees about $100 each to board. According to migrants and shelter personnel stated that if migrants cannot pay they are either abused or pushed off the train while it is moving. In 2014, the former Governor of Veracruz, Javier Duarte de Ochoa, filed a criminal complaint before the Attorney General’s Office (PGR) against two train companies operating in southern Mexico, claiming that the companies were being accomplices of organized crimes by allowing migrants to ride on top of the trains. As a result, the train companies began to prohibit migrants from traveling on the Tenosique-Palenque train line.

The Walk

Before Hurricane Stan in 2005, another route, following Chiapas Pacific coast, used to begin in Tapachula, until the hurricane destroyed it. Now the route starts in Arriaga, Chiapas. This means that migrants who arrive in Tapachula must walk to Arriaga 150 miles to the northwest. This treacherous journey takes migrants about two weeks on foot, with limited access to food or water. In order to avoid checkpoints between Tapachula and Arriaga and ease the walking distance, many will get on combis (taxis) and before a checkpoint they dismount, and walk through bushland. Ever since, the “war on drugs” began abuses against migrants on this journey escalated. Some of these abuses include: sexual abuses, extortion, beaten and even killed, particularly in an area known as “La Arrocera” in Huixla- a municipality in Chiapas, Mexico.

Moreover, as routes have become more complex and longer due to border checkpoints, efforts made to prohibit migrants from riding “La Bestia” border smugglers fees have increased with migrants reporting paying between US$9,000 and 10,000
compared to US $6,000-8,000. A June 2015 investigation by the Mexican investigative journalism organization Periodistas de a Pie determined that a main consequence of the Southern Border Program has not been to stop the flow of migration, but rather to make it more expensive, raising bribes that coyotes must pay—a cost that is passed on to the migrants (Guevara, 2019).
Chapter V.

Migration Gap

The purpose of this chapter is to pinpoint the missing factors between the programs implemented during the last four administrations in Mexico, to regulate unauthorized immigration and protect migrants’ rights on the southern border of Mexico and their outcome. Each administration has faced distinct narrative at the international and domestic level, and in consequence, they have had different priorities and strategies to combat unauthorized immigration and secure migrants rights. The assessment of those strategies helps to identify the difference between political discourse and the policies enacted and the results obtained through the implementation of specific measures to control unauthorized immigration and protect migrant’s rights.

The transition of political parties in power in 2000, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the war against drugs declared in 2006, international economic crises, the approval of the Mexican immigration reform in 2011, (Ley de Migracion) resources from the Merida Initiative, and the increment of the defense budget, have adjusted the narrative of unauthorized immigration from and through Mexico. Furthermore, Mexico faces the dilemma to resist international pressures from the United States to control its southern border and stop unauthorized immigration, and from Central American countries to protect their citizens in transit through Mexico, while designing migration laws according to national interests and the exigencies of civil society. Internal political preferences are another vital factor to define migration policies in Mexico. For instance, Ernesto Zedillo promoted a vision of Mexico as a country without borders. Vicente Fox nourished
restrictive policies to control the southern border of the country and signed the Mexico-U.S. Border Partnership Action Plan in 2002 (Mohar, 2017), hoping to negotiate an immigration reform with the United States but unfortunately his efforts failed. Felipe Calderon removed migration from the bilateral agenda with the United States. He increased considerably the defense budget, incorporated the armed forces to fight organized crime throughout the country, and continued with the gradual militarization of the border to prevent drug trafficking (Rodriguez, Sandoval, Ramos, 2011). Peña-Nieto opted for a regional and integral approach for the regularization of transit migration and non-interference in the United States immigration reform. The new elected President AMLO proposed to implement a migration policy that respects and upholds the rights of Central American migrants. AMLO has also proposed economic development plans in Mexico’s southern border region and development assistance to the NTCA to tackle the underlying causes of migration.

This chapter is organized in specific sections for each administration included in the assessment. The first section covers the Vicente Fox government from 2000-2006. The next section includes the Felipe Calderon administration from 2007 to 2012. The third section highlights the Enrique Pena-Nieto administration from 2012-2018. Lastly, the current, Andrés Manuel López Obrador government is presented.

The Regulation of Unauthorized Immigration in the Vicente Fox Administration

The issue of migration is one of the most significant changes in Mexican foreign policy to take during the Fox administration. When Fox took office a reassessment of the migration issued occurred, and making it, for the first time history of Mexico-United States relations, a priority issue on the bilateral agenda. The shift of both governments
regarding the migration issue was based on the recognition of a reality: the overwhelming increase of migration against the tide of what was foreseen or proclaimed by neoliberal doctrine and the inability of the United States to regulate it unilaterally and under strict police or military-style measures such as those contained in the 1996 law (Mohar, 2017). Furthermore, the bilateral agenda included regularization of the immigration status of citizens, a guest worker program, increase in the number of visas, tightened security on the border, and the promotion of development programs in areas of high migration. However, the United States embassy warned Fox that there was no opportunity for the migration reform if Mexico did not stop the flow of Central American unauthorized immigrants heading to the United States. In consequence, Mexico promised to seal its southern border, offering the restriction to Central American transit unauthorized immigration as a bargain coin (Grayson, 2002).

High-level discussions to reach a comprehensive immigration reform between Fox and Bush initiated in 2001, but after the 9/11 terrorists attacks the conversations ended. In consequence, the relationship between Mexico-U.S. migration shifted from integration to the securitization of migration and the strengthening of border controls, subordinating immigration issues to homeland security and anti-terrorist operations. During the Summit of the Americans in 2001, former President Bush made reference to the Third Border Initiatives (TBI), recognizing the relevance of Central America and the southern border of Mexico for the security of the United States (Alba, 2013). In its quest to reach regional integration with North America, Mexico faced the dilemma to harden migration controls on its southern border or to strengthen the historical relations of the southern states of the country with Central American countries.
The Fox administration tried to achieve a balance between its compromise for regional security with the United States, and the economic relations with Central America. Given the need of cross-border trade, and the informal crossing of Guatemalan labors and border residents to compensate for the lack of socioeconomic development and the weak presence of the state in the region, Mexico did not attempt to enforce the physical southern border of the country. Instead, this administration used a vertical border approach with belts control and mobile checkpoints to enforce migration controls and simultaneously to give some space for informal border relations. Furthermore, some agreements were signed with Central America countries to share the responsibility to regulate unauthorized immigration. Despite the efforts of the Fox administration to maintain a positive notion of Mexico with Central America, the country was perceived as an ally of the United States and as a checkpoint country (Garcia, 2011).

Protecting NTCA Migrant Rights

At the start of his presidency, Fox declared that he would defend the rights of Mexican migrants residing in the United States. Likewise, he stated that he would not allow further abuses against Central American immigrants in the country, for which he would appoint a high-level official to increase efforts at the southern border of Mexico and create the Commission for the Protection of Migrant in the Office of the Presidency under the direct coordination of the National Security Council.

National Development Plan 2001-2006, the Fox administration established as priority the need to control the growing illegal trafficking of people, weapons and drugs on Mexico’s southern border. It stressed the need to engage in international forums and negotiations to address the structural roots of migration, its manifestations and
consequences, and it declared unauthorized immigration as a shared responsibility. This plan also recognized that economic development and integration between the southern region of the country and Central America could help to combat illegal activities in the region. Furthermore, it recognized that Central America unauthorized immigrants were subject to abuses, and the INM lacked the personal and infrastructure at border points (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo 2007-2012).

The Fox administration specified the following points pertaining to the Mexican migration policy: Facilitate the regulation of undocumented workers whose temporary and definitive destination is the southern states of Mexico, protect the rights of unauthorized migrants in transit, foster the security of the region, and update the management of migration flow. To execute this migration policy, the Fox administration promoted various programs on the southern border of the region, the key plans were the following: Regularization of migrants and temporary-worker programs (Grayson, 2002), The Southern Plan (Plan Sur), in force between 2001 and 2003 (Casillas, 2002), Anti-Maras police operation such as Operation Acero (Villafuerte, 2007) and The Proposal of Integral Migration Policy for the Southern Border of Mexico (Castillo, 2006).

In conclusion, the Fox administration acknowledge the vulnerability of Central American migrants and the violations, abuses and extortions they suffer while in transit committed by state officials, smugglers and gangs. To address this issue, the Fox administration suggested the reorganization of INM for professionalization in human rights and for training. The government implemented and proposed strategies to attempt to protect migrants’ rights during their journey from and to Mexico and during their time in detention centers in the southern region of Mexico.
The Fox administration was able to identify programs and plans to regulate migration, protect migrants’ rights and enter into high-level talks with the United States to address immigration between the two countries. However, despite the efforts made to advance these complex issues, the government was not able to develop a systematic approach in the following areas: Ongoing trainings to protect migrants’ rights, infrastructures implemented along the southern border of the region to prevent migrants from crossing dangerous terrains and a planning process to identify the needed resources, interventions and unintended consequences.

The Regulation of Unauthorized Immigration in the Felipe Calderon Administration

The 2006 election was the most competitive in Mexican history, Felipe Calderon, a conservative former minister, “against Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the firebrand leftist former mayor of Mexico City, won with 38 percent the vote, compared to 35 percent for” AMLO (Jr. 2006).

The post-electoral conflict set by the opposition threaten the stability to gain public support and the legitimacy of the new government. Several authors explain that, as a strategy to gain public support and the consolidation of the government, Calderon declared a war against organized crime (Wolf, 2011). It produced an initial replacement of migration for security as the leading concern of Mexico and for its bilateral relations with U.S. However, the spillover of violence into Mexico and Central America, and the economic crisis of 2008, produced new patterns of migration that brought the topic back to discussion. For instance, from 2005 to 2010, voluntary returned migration of Mexicans was greater than the flow of unauthorized immigration to the United States, and transit
migration from Central America to the United States increased dramatically. Therefore, the Mexican government faced the dilemma of implementing border security measures against organized crime and, simultaneously, actions to regulate and protect transit migrants (Wolf, 2011).

The Calderon administration focused on the fight against organized crime, national security concerns, expanding security agencies and the armed forces along the southern border. Likewise, the Calderon administration attempted to improve migration flows and border management through the modernization of infrastructure and institutions, regularization programs and the implementation of new types of visas. The deterioration of security throughout Mexico reached the southern border of the country and migratory routes. Its effects were worst over unauthorized immigrants because of their vulnerability and the lack of government preparedness to attend to this new phenomenon. The abuses and violations of unauthorized immigrants attracted the attention of non-state actors that complained against the government to adopt a new migration policy based on humanitarian policy. Considering migration policy, the Calderon government did not have the power to arrange an immigration reform with the United States that would give it more liberty on deciding the border model to be implemented. Originally the administration considered that Central American unauthorized immigration was particularly for economic reasons, and it proposed measures oriented to foster economic development and provide more opportunities to regional migrants. However, violence related to Central American gangs produced forced migration that could not be solved by closing the border or through regularization and temporary-worker programs.
Protecting NTCA Migrant Rights

“The spate of violent and shocking attacks against transiting migrants in 2010 and 2011 at the hands of organized crime groups moved the issue to the top of the Mexican political agenda, and in April 2011 the Mexican Congress unanimously approved a new migration law” (MPI, 2011).

Upon signing the law, Calderon called the reforms the most sweeping changes to “Mexican immigration law since the 1974 General Population Law, which primarily focused on the challenges of managing emigration” (MPI, 2011).

The new law was supposed to develop a migration policy that respects the human rights of migration; facilitates the movement of people in a structured and organized way; meets the country’s labor needs; guarantee equal rights for Mexican natives and foreigners residing in the country; promotes family unity and socio-cultural integration and facilitates the return and reintegration of Mexican abroad. The following principle from the Migratory Act of 2011 reads:

Unrestricted respect for the human rights of migrants, citizens, and foreigners of any place, nationality, gender, ethnicity, age, and migratory status, with a special focus on vulnerable groups, such as minors, women, indigenous individuals, adolescents, elderly individuals, and crime victims. In no event is irregular migratory status on its own considered the perpetration of a crime, nor will it be considered the perpetration of illicit acts by the migrant as the result of his or her not being documented. (MPI, 2011)

The enactment of the Migration law was primarily due to the pressure from Central American governments and NGO’s to protect immigrants from abuses on their transit to Mexico. However, after the massacre of 72 Central American unauthorized immigrants in August 2010 in San Fernando, Tamaulipas that Calderon and Congress took the demands seriously. Yet, even with the implementation of the Migration law,
abuses and corruption continued. For instance, in 2011 the National Human Rights
Commission placed the INM Institute in third place for human rights violations, with
1,301 complains. According to Human Rights Watch, the INM fired 350 agents linked to
organized crime. Other reports indicate that between 2010-2011, INM sanctioned 200
agents for crimes against migrants and corruption. According to information provided by
INM in response to a resolution of the Federal Institution for the Access of Information,
only 21 migration agents were sanctioned for violations of migrants’ human rights
(Gonzalez, 2013).

In conclusion, the most significant laws executed by the Calderon administration
to protect migrants’ human rights and regulate migration, was the Migration Law and
reforms to the General Population Law. Although the application of these laws cannot be
assessed due to scant data, several non-state actors surfaced outstanding concerns. With
the involvement of security agencies in the implementation of migration laws, migrants
were treated as criminals and there was no information available to inform migrants
about the new migration provisions under the Migration Law. Lastly, the involvement of
more security forces to secure the border and combat organized crime was intertwined
with enforcing migration laws and drug trafficking control. The security strategy
enforced by the Calderon administration left the country in a state of generalized
insecurity. During his six years in office, approximately 60,000 deaths connected with
violence related to organized crime, and about 25,000 people disappeared. The
deployment of military personnel occurred with no legal framework that authorized or
regulated it. The use of the armed forces led to an increase in human rights violations and
the use of deadly violence by security forces (Giacomello, 2013). Therefore, the “war
against organize” crime dispersed efforts to regulate migration and made migrants more vulnerable to corrupt officials and organized crime.

The Regulation of Unauthorized Immigration in the Enrique Peña Nieto Administration

In 2012, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) won the Mexican presidential elections after twelve years of government by the Partido de Accion Nacional (PAN). When Peña Nieto took office, “Mexico was already involved in a serious crisis of violence, with thousands of people caught in the crossfire” (Guevara, 2019) on the “war against drugs”. During his election campaign, Peña Nieto vowed to tackle the “war against drugs”, asserted the responsibility of the state to protect the human rights of migrants and the necessity to install regional cooperation to regulate migration. To face the complexities of the regulation of migration, the Peña Nieto government gathered non-state actors and civil society for the development of a migration policy. In 2013, the administration began the development of the Special Migration Program 2014-2018 with the participation of agencies involved in the regulation of migration, civil society, academics and the government. The program recognized, that respect for migrants’ human rights, regardless of their migratory status, continue to be a challenge both abroad and in Mexico. The program can be summarized in five points:

1. Promotion of a culture of legality, human rights and respect for migration

2. Incorporation of migration issues in the regional and local development strategies

3. Consolidation of effective migration management, based on facilitation, co-responsibility, border security and human safety
4. Development of integration and reintegration processes for migrants and their families

5. Strengthening access to judicial remedies and to personal safety for migrants, their families, and those who work in defending their rights. (Boletín, 2014)

Furthermore, in 2014, the Peña Nieto administration incorporated the Southern Border Program to protect and safeguard the human rights of migrants in Mexico. The objective of the Southern Border Program was to protect migrants entering Mexico and to manage the ports of entry in the region. The program consisted of five key points:

1. Regular and ordered migration
2. Improvement in infrastructure of border security
3. Protecting migrants
4. Regional shared responsibility
5. Interagency coordination

The Southern Border Program is a merger of the Southern Plan developed during the Fox administration and the Plan for the Reordering of the Southern Border of the Calderón government. It includes border restrictions, security measures, and regulations to protect migrants. The South Program considers the reinforcement of the participation of security agencies to secure the border, bringing again the idea of mobile checkpoints and belts of control to combat organized crime while protecting unauthorized immigrants. However, this program is more coherent and specific with the realities of the border. For instance, the program identifies five different border regions for its management, which are related with migration routes and the geography of the southern border. Furthermore,
the belts of control include internal points in Huixtla, Comitán, Palenque and Playas de Catazajá, which are important nodes in the migration routes.

As in, previous models of “Plan Sur”, the plan lacked disposition to facilitate transit migration. To improve the regulation of migration along the southern border of the country, the Peña Nieto administration created the Integral Attention of Migrants (Boletin, 2014). The government made this decision in response to the increase of Central American unauthorized immigrants crossing the country. This body is responsible for synchronizing and monitoring migration policies and related actions. However, there are no representatives of the different agencies in the coordination, communication and operation processes are not defined, authority and subordination relations are confusing, and this body does not have real power over the distribution of resources and the execution of operations. The government has already implemented the Special Program for Migration, the Migration Policy Unit, and the Advisory Council on Migration Policy. The creation of another institution—without defining its relation with previous programs, and without the organizational strength to execute its mission—is harmful to the regulation of migration.

Protecting NTCA Migrant Rights

Former President Peña Nieto promised to transform Mexico with an ambitious agenda of structural reforms when he took office. His presidency started off strongly with the implementation of several policies to regulate migration, protect migrants’ rights and establishing the hallmark immigration policy, the Southern Border Program. During Peña Nieto’s last weeks in office, as the caravan of migration from Central America began to
cross through southern Mexico, his administration created the “Estas en tu casa” program to offer temporary work permits for Central Americans who requested asylum and stayed in the southern Mexican states” (Wattenbarger, 2018) of Chiapas and Oaxaca. As of mid-November 2018, the government indicated that 546 migrants had enrolled in the program, though caravan members largely rejected it because of the lack of work in that part of the country (Wattenbarger, 2018). “The government of Mexico reiterates that its unconditional commitment to migrant’s human rights is not, however, an endorsement of irregular, massive and undocumented entry into Mexican territory. On the contrary it again calls on those wishing to enter Mexico to avoid unnecessary risks and follow the procedures established by Mexican Law,” Mexico’s Secretary of Foreign Relations stated (Guevara, 2019).

However, six years later the legacy of Peña Nieto has been translated into disturbing facts: more than “37,000 disappeared persons, around 60% of whom disappeared in the last six years; multiple instances of extrajudicial executions carried out by security forces against migrants and citizens; and the widespread practice of torture, including sexual torture, as a standard procedure in the justice system” (Guevara, 2019).

The last two years of Peña Nieto’s presidency were the most violent in recent history, with an average of more than two thousands murders a month, femicide epidemic across the country, resulting in Mexico becoming one of the most dangerous countries in the world for human rights defenders and journalists; and the scourge of discrimination and inequality continues to affect most of the population, where impunity and corruption are the norm (Guevara, 2019).
The Regulation of Unauthorized Immigration in the Andrés Manuel López Obrador Administration

AMLO took office as President in December 2018. With two months in power, it’s difficult to reach a conclusion or evaluate the performance of his administration in regulating migration and protecting migrants’ rights. However, since AMLO’s landslide victory, solidifying his Morena Party by winning a majority in both chambers of Congress, winning 5 out of 9 state governorships, and winning a majority of state-level legislatures, AMLO’s triumph and proposed legislation on migration are vital factors to address.

Throughout his campaign, AMLO spoke of the need for a Fourth Transformation of Mexico, AMLO asserted that his government would bring about a peaceful and democratic shift in governance in the country, facilitating a transformation not just of government but of society and the economy. “He also promised that the established political elites would be removed from their positions of power: the scale of his election victory affected such removal” (Wood, 2018). AMLO began his presidency with the strongest mandate of any Mexican president in decades, control of Congress, and enough state legislatures to push through constitutional reforms (Wood, 2018).

AMLO and Migration

Mexico’s Southern Border Program deports more Central Americans than the U.S., but many still cross through Mexico’s porous border through illicit channels. The number of asylum requests to Mexico has increased by “150 percent since 2013 largely from the NTCA. With only a few dozen employees handling thousands of cases a year, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance is in dire need of resources to process
the mounting backlog of asylum requests.” To tackle some of these challenges, AMLO proposed policy options. For Central America, the “Secretary of the Interior said they would implement a migration policy that respects and upholds the rights of Central American migrants. AMLO has proposed economic development plans in Mexico’s southern border region and development assistance to Central America to tackle the underlying causes of migration. He has broached the idea of instating a modern “Alliance for Progress” (Wood, 2018), which would bring jobs and development to Mexico and Central America and reduce the drivers of emigration. Finally, Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard said Mexico would focus on opportunities to further engage with the United States on migration. Furthermore, AMLO has mentioned creating a Mexican border patrol as a response to the NTCA migration flows through Mexico’s southern border. The United States who already provides funding to Mexico’s Southern Border Program, may seek to renew and expand its commitment to Mexico’s southern border initiatives if they contribute to reducing flows of Central American migration. AMLO has dialed back on the idea, but it is a strategy the United States might continue pushing. The United States has also proposed a “safe third country agreement” where Central Americans must apply for asylum in Mexico once they set a foot in the country. AMLO, thus far, has framed the agreement as a domestic issue for the United States.

This policy option is difficult to consider because Mexico is not quite a safe third country for migrants, but it has the potential to be, if AMLO were to implement rigorous reforms with help from the United States.

To varying degrees, both Mexico and the United States have expressed the need to invest in the root cause of Central American migration, focusing on the development
of NTCA countries and Mexico’s southern border. There are opportunities for alignment but they will require foresight to maintain both Mexico’s and the United States interest.
Chapter VI.

Conclusion

This study sought to determine why programs and strategies implemented by the Mexican government failed to regulate migration and protect NTCA migrants’ human rights on the southern border region. The assessment used to aid in determining the factors attributed to failed policies, was the evaluation of Mexican governments since 2000. It was shown that deficiencies related to the policy-making process are connected to a lack of policies, external and internal forces, and policies implemented or developed without an integrated approach.

To legitimize the claims proposed, this paper described NTCA unauthorized origins and trends, the attribute of Mexico as a transit country for migration, and the characteristics of the southern border of Mexico. The analysis was designed to identify the components of the system that migration programs and plans attempt to regulate and the points of intervention.

Mexico’s character as a country of emigration, immigration, and transit makes it extremely difficult to regulate migration along the southern border region. As an emigration country, Mexico has fostered policies for regional integration with the United States in economic and security issues, offering stricter controls of its southern border in exchange for migration reform that favors Mexicans. As an immigration country, Mexico has implemented several components such as temporary-worker permits and border-resident visas. Furthermore, the migration legal framework was reformed to provide more certainty and services to immigrants. However, Mexico has failed as a transit country...
because it has not developed effective policies to regulate migration flow and protect the integrity of migrants. Although it decriminalized unauthorized immigration, transit migrants are unprotected from corrupt authorities and organized crimes. The complete powerlessness of NTCA migrants derived from their physical marginalization and their inability to access justice due to impunity, opens up the machinery of oppression for anyone that wants to partake.

The self-reinforcing cycle of measures and countermeasures between governments, organized crime, and unauthorized immigration complicate the control of the southern border of Mexico even more. Restrictive measures along main highways to control NTCA migrants in transit made this phenomenon less visible, pushing migrants to take isolated routes and hire the services of professional smugglers. The illegal points of entry throughout the southern border of Mexico, migration routes to cross the country and the most dangerous routes have been identified in this paper to highlight the “invisible crisis”. Considering the displeasing information, it was expected that the Mexican government would implement plans and programs to regulate and protect migrants. To verify this, this paper included an assessment on migration policies from four administrations.

From the assessment of the Fox administration it can be concluded that efforts made to regulate migration was for the benefit of Mexican migrants while, NTCA migrants were an afterthought. Furthermore, “Plan Sur” objectives were broadly defined, lacked resources and there was no agency with authority to control the border. INM as coordinator, did not have the organizational strength, resources or professionalism to carry out the responsibility to regulate migration at the southern border region.
Nevertheless, the Calderon administration took a different approach from that of the Fox administration. War against organized crime became a central focus for the administration. Border management and the regulation of unauthorized immigration became part of government security. The government expanded the presence of security agencies; however, instead of containing unauthorized immigrants and organized crime, they involved and collided, increasing the vulnerability of migrants. Furthermore, the war against crime had damaging effects in Central America, compelling more migration. In reality, the government tried to regulate a problem that it had, but made it worse.

The Peña-Nieto administration started by addressing the complexities of the Mexican borders and the need to manage them. It developed a democratic planning process, emphasizing a comprehensive approach to evaluate migration policies. The administration also asked the collaboration of civil society and non-state actors. The Special Migration Program 2014-2018, combined the ideas and efforts of many state actors for the regulation and protection of migrants. The nature of the Migration Program 2014–2018 changed with the implementation of other initiatives. For instance, the government created the South Border Program for the protection of the human rights of migrants, the reordering of the border, and the fostering of regional security and development. Hence, the idea of combining security with migration issues, even though it proved to be disastrous, was retaken by the Peña-Nieto administration. This program was more specific to the particularities of border regions, and included coordination among agencies and with Guatemala, but these are security provisions. Measures to regulate migration included in this plan are oriented for regional and not for transit migration.
Initiatives such as the Regional Visitor Card, however, could reduce informal crosses and make the border more manageable.

The problem is that programs and initiatives created to regulate unauthorized immigration are not allowed to mature. For instance, the increase of unaccompanied children in transit, the caravan of migrants from the NTCA and the continuous exposure of the media of deplorable conditions in which unauthorized immigrants across the country, triggers a government reaction. This reaction does not result in the evaluation and improvement of the programs in place and in making the responsible accountable. Instead, it created more bureaucracy that lacks the resources, knowledge, and authority to offer a real solution. The system that was carefully created to regulate unauthorized immigration turned into a confusing and overlapping responsibilities, undermining what the administration was trying to accomplish.

Lastly, when AMLO was sworn in as the 58th President of Mexico, several thousands of NTCA migrants were undergoing their third consecutive week in Tijuana, Mexico and in January 2019, a second caravan of migrants from Honduras headed to the United States. The earlier caravan expanded to more than 5,000 people before traveling through Guatemala and Mexico. The latest caravan is part of a growing wave of Central Americans, among them many families with children, arriving at the southern border region and requesting asylum.

So far, AMLO’s narrative regarding migration is pro-migrant, though in most areas, his concrete plans have yet to materialize. Ana Saiz Valenzuela, the director of Sin Fronteras IAP, has been pleasantly surprised by AMLO’s rhetoric around immigration so
far. “Ideas like, ‘no migration is illegal’- this is really a change in discourse compared to previous administration,” said Saiz.

In the first weeks of his presidency, AMLO presented an “Attention to Migrants” program in Baja California, which will support shelters in the area and take new measures to reinforce migrant safety. Though the policy specifics are still yet to be seen, AMLO’s attitude towards migration so far contrasted with that of his predecessors. One of AMLO’s first acts as president was to sign an agreement with the NTCA countries to create a “Holistic Development Plan” in order to avert people from needing to migrate. Luis Angel Gallegos, a consultant at the Center for Economic Research, stated that “gearing immigration policies toward mitigating poverty is an unprecedented policy step on an international level. It marks a changing relationship with the Northern Triangle,” said Gallegos, “and recognizes migration as more than a border security issue, but instead as a part of a complex social cycle” (Wattenbarger, 2018). Documents from the agreement are still yet to be seen, however, many human rights organizations and communities are optimistic about his administration’s approach to immigration policy.

The new administration appears to be on track by addressing the root cause of the Central American migration, proposing policies that protect migrants’ rights and ways to manage the southern border of the country. If the AMLO government neglects to address these issues by implementing a systematic approach, Mexico will continue as a checkpoint country, and as one of the biggest graveyards for unauthorized immigrants.
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