

Mexico's Sowing Life Program: Deterring Immigration or Climate Change Dilemma?

Written by Franco Laguna Correa

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On July 1 2020, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) replaced the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). From the American perspective, the new agreement highlighted the preeminent role of American industrial and agricultural workers in North America, a region which historically has seen Mexico as an uncomfortable member, with more cultural ties to Central America than to the US and Canada. Moreover, the Office of the United States Trade Representative confirmed that the new agreement focuses on enhancing the working conditions of American industry and farming workers, and the modernization and leadership of American agribusinesses in the North American region. On the other hand, Trudeau's government announced that the new agreement acknowledged the economic benefits of trade between Canada and the US and Mexico, while also setting up the diplomatic "seeds" for the assessment of the environmental impact of the trilateral new trade agreement. As for the Mexican perspective, former president of Mexico Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) emphasized that the lengthy process of renegotiating NAFTA was an opportunity to reconcile divergent points of view with the US. Peña Nieto also highlighted that the agreement considered questions related to the social impact of international trade while also pointing out the inextricable relationship between worker's rights and environmental protection.

Amidst the current COVID-19 Pandemic, the coming into force of USMCA is currently facing a 'new immigration crisis' between the US, Mexico, and Central America, which is indeed an old phenomenon whose origin dates back to the period in-between WWII and the Vietnam War, a period in which due to the deployment of American soldiers from rural regions created a sudden lack of workforce in the American agricultural sector. I read the current immigration border crisis as a dialectical process that began with the masculinized *Bracero Program* (thesis) between the US and Mexico (1942–1964) – 'bracero' meaning a man who works using his arms – which ultimately set the cultural foundations of the new Chicano generations that settled mostly on the Western regions of the US.

A few decades later, during the neoliberal 1980s the feminization of the US-Mexico border (anti-thesis) brought to the US a new wave of Mexican domestic job-seekers whose ultimate purpose was ensuring that their babies became American citizens. The synthesis in this dialectical immigration process, as we have witnessed during the first decades of the twenty-first century, has Central America – with a focus on El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras – as the epicenter of a new wave of an immigrant workforce seeking in the US a similar status to those Mexican communities that have successfully relocated north of the border over the course of the second half of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the Central American immigration patterns to the US, now seen as a national security affair, began to receive international attention until 2010 when Amnesty International issued the report 'Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico', which openly denounced the manifold violations to the Human Rights of the Central Americans crossing through Mexico on their way to the US, a report that emphasized the life-threatening conditions that endangered the lives of those immigrants traveling on the so-called 'The Death Train' (known in Mexico as 'The Beast').

In June 2021, pressured by the ongoing border immigration crisis that has portrayed Central Americans as the embodiment of such crisis, Vice President Kamala Harris made her first international official trip to the Mexican

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capital – and later to Guatemala – to have a face-to-face encounter with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) to share views aimed at stopping the flow of Central Americans on their way to the US. On a photograph featured in *The New York Times* on June 8, we can see Kamala Harris wearing a black mask next to AMLO with his face uncovered, while both walk calmly near the Mexican National Palace in downtown Mexico City. Even though the purpose of Harris' trip wasn't supposed to be related to COVID-19 contention measures, the photograph speaks for itself, suggesting that the US won't relax their sanitary restrictions overseas including, of course, Mexico. The final remarks of the diplomatic venture of Harris on Mexican soil was the mutual commitment between the US and Mexico to deter migration of Central Americans by addressing the systemic poverty and corruption that is driving this unprecedented waves of undocumented Central Americans to the US through Mexico, however, without defining any specific strategy to achieve these goals.

As a precedent of this highly anticipated encounter, during the virtual Leaders Summit for Climate led by President Joe Biden last April, AMLO – without the presence of Biden, as he had already left by the time the Mexican President addressed the Summit's audience – presented the Sowing Life Program ('Sembrando Vida' in Spanish). The Program was launched in 2018 as an initiative to reactivate and create sustainable agricultural communities in nineteen Mexican states mostly from southern Mexico. The program aims at promoting a reforestation plan that includes the reinsertion of highly marketable tree species such a cedar, mahogany, pine, cacao, among other regional fruit trees.

When AMLO mentioned in the Summit that the Sowing Life Program could be expanded to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and later to the entire Central American region with the financial support of the US as a maneuver to: 1) Deter immigration from Central America, and 2) Create a viable working visas program for Central American rural workers willing to work in the US, the response of the senior official speaking on behalf of President Biden pointed out that, 'this is not a conversation about migration but a conversation about climate change'.

Economics Professor Giovanni Peri, founder and Director of the UC-Davis Global Migration Center, pointed out that, 'the expansion of Sowing Life to Central America would create an adequate framework and the long-term perspective for the creation of an effective plan, instead of enacting emergency measures, that could positively transform the three economies'. While the Sowing Life Program is aimed at employing only Mexican citizens, there is evidence that the landlords already benefiting from the program are employing Central American rural workers whose immigration status is either as refugees or undocumented. In interviews held by Mexican journalist Eduardo Torres in the state of Chiapas, which borders Guatemala, the Sowing Life Program is already providing employment to immigrants from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, many of whom didn't fear mentioning the xenophobia that permeates Mexican society in relation to Central American people, while also expressing their desire to go back to their countries once political turmoil and everyday forms of violence decrease.

The Sowing Life Program could potentially become a regional endeavor to contain immigration flows towards the North and improve people's lives in Central America. Therefore, a fundamental question is how do we prevent a welfare policy such as this from becoming a tool of political skirmish, as opposed to a tool of improving people's lives?

About the author:

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