

Rootedness to prevent forced migration

KEY FINDINGS FROM A CRS STUDY ON PUSH AND RETENTION FACTORS FOR MIGRATION IN GUATEMALA

In the past five years, northward migration from Central America has sharply increased. As the number of migrants grows, the profile of migrants has also shifted, with an increase in the number of migrants from vulnerable populations. While the traditional migrant profile is a young single male, recent years have seen more women, unaccompanied minors, and even entire families migrating north in search of asylum, better opportunities, and a more dignified life.

As migrants' profile and migratory patterns shift, so too have the motivations and circumstances that drive people from their homes. In 2020, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) commissioned a large study (n= 874) in communities where CRS implements programs in Guatemala to better understand the profile of the 'new migrant'. Compared to many analyses of the past, the study examined not only the causes that drive people to leave but more critically, the factors that encourage them to stay in their communities. The low perceived risk by study participants of the U.S. border patrol, detention camps, and a global pandemic demonstrates that migration will persist despite these risks and that punitive measures are ineffective to quell the flow of migration. By better understanding and investing in the factors that help people root and thrive in their communities we can address migration in a more effective and humane way.

Rootedness factors

- Education and training connected to formal jobs.
- Community engagement/ leadership for development opportunities.
- Access and management of land for sustainable and adaptive agriculture.
- Stable, formal employment.

Push factors

- Unemployment/ lack of formal employment
- Inequitable access to arable land and perceived threat of natural disasters
- Discrimination and feeling undervalued in one's community.

WHAT ARE THE LATEST DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN MIGRATION?

While many traditional factors—violence, lack of economic opportunities, and climate change— continue to drive migration, several findings indicate new factors and complexities are driving migration and its changing profile. These include:

- Those with **greater education levels are more likely to express the intention to migrate**. Among those who expressed intention to migrate 29% had not finished elementary school as compared to 49% of those who did not express intention to migrate.
- Although males are more likely to express intention to migrate overall (15% of men versus 9% of women), this significant gender disparity disappears among the population under 30 and especially for those with higher education, leading to a **feminization of migration** and a 'female brain drain'.
- Socioeconomic status as measured by a poverty index did not have a significant quantitative association with intention to migrate. However, this study found that people living in extreme poverty and food insecurity were more likely to be undecided. While these individuals often do not have the resources to make the journey using traditional means, when they make the decision to migrate, they may be more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

WHAT HELPS PEOPLE STAY IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

Of 785 people surveyed, 77% had little or no intention to migrate from their communities. Among this population, we identified the shared factors that promoted rootedness or the desire to remain in one's community of origin:

- Access to basic health and educational services and stable and formal jobs, especially for young people
- Access to formal education and other types of training when linked to profitable job opportunities
- Access and management of fertile land and the ability to sustain harvests and adapt to climate change to improve agricultural productivity
- Community participation and leadership when linked to opportunities that directly improve living conditions.

It is important to note the conditionality of the findings. Education and community leadership/engagement alone do not promote rootedness; they must be attached to economic and social development opportunities. These conditions should push policy makers and implementers alike to design comprehensive outcome-based programs that promote the factors that contribute to community rootedness.

THE GREATEST PREDICTORS OF MIGRATION ARE LACK OF JOBS, PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION, AND GREATER EXPECTATIONS FOR CHANGE

Lack of dignified work, perceived discrimination, and greater expectations for change (expressed as a desire for a better life) were significantly correlated with intention to migration while the relationship with poverty was unclear. The study found stronger linkages between occupation and intention to migrate than socioeconomic status and intention to migrate. People who worked as day laborers in agriculture, construction, and as domestic workers had a greater intention to migrate, followed by students and the unemployed.

Experiencing discrimination was one of the greatest predictors of migratory intention. When the intention was analyzed as a continuum from the 'certainty' of migration to the total rejection of the migratory option, the most important push factors were related to discrimination and exclusion within communities. Almost 50% of those who intended to migrate felt undervalued in their communities, significantly more than those who intended to stay.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

- 1. Develop a just and humane migration strategy.** The U.S. administration should develop a strategy toward the northern countries of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) that prioritizes addressing the push factors of migration and promoting the rootedness factors. While such programs to increase rootedness will primarily target those who are more educated and well-off, the strategy should also address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable communities and prioritize robust consultation with local, national, and international stakeholders, including faith-based organizations.
- 2. Increase humanitarian and development funding in the region for programs that address push factors and promote rootedness factors.** Evidence generated from CRS programs and this migration study demonstrate that programs that invest in growing formal job opportunities, gender equity (especially in decision-making spaces), climate adapted agricultural practices, job-relevant education and training, and social inclusion of the most marginalized populations (women, indigenous, youth, among others) in decision-making spaces can decrease the intention to migrate by increasing rootedness factors. Rather than focusing on deterring migration, Congress and the Administration should appropriate and allocate resources to build prosperous and safe communities where people can achieve a dignified life for themselves and their families.
- 3. The U.S. Administration should request, and the U.S. Congress should provide supplemental resources for the international response to COVID-19.** COVID-19 has exacerbated all the factors that push people to migrate and yet fear of catching the virus has not reduced migrant flows significantly. The secondary impacts of the pandemic on food security, poverty, and unemployment have yet to be realized in Central America. Any additional funds appropriated should focus on the groups most vulnerable to the economic hardship and lost opportunities produced by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 4. Focus development strategies on improving conditions for women and youth.** In partnership with local organizations and large-scale development agencies like CRS, and in alignment with USAID country development cooperation strategies (CDCS), U.S. assistance should add youth and gender-sensitive components and outcomes to its primary programming. Youth are the most likely to migrate and women are migrating at an increasing rate. While many initiatives currently prioritize youth and women, tying them to specific outcomes like formal employment and community engagement/ leadership to increase development opportunities will more effectively promote rootedness.
- 5. Support institutional partnerships that increase employment opportunities.** Increase investment in job placement programs that broker connections between young people, vocational training, and stable job opportunities. Incorporating partnerships with the private and public sectors to provide a pipeline of stable employment is critical for helping youth remain in their home countries by creating prosperous and dignified careers.
- 6. Promote community engagement/leadership as a tenet in all development programs.** While nearly all participants felt tied to their communities, it did not prevent migration unless community participation inspired opportunities for social and economic development. Funding should be allocated to local community leadership programs to increase community social capital. Additional funding should be allocated to promote greater community engagement and leadership for women and youth.