In Guatemala, a Steep Climb for Returning Migrants

Janelle Conaway
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by Janelle Conaway

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Flights chartered by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement land almost every weekday in Guatemala City, bringing back Guatemalan citizens who have been working in the US without documents—or at least trying to. These days, many more Guatemalan migrants are deported by land from Mexico before they ever reach US soil. What happens to those who return, once they’re back in their homeland? Many of them, faced with crushing debt and few opportunities, head back north. Others try to make a go of it at home, but they have little support. A few groups are trying to make it easier for people to stay, but it’s an uphill climb.

Migration experts talk about “push” and “pull” factors—the myriad of reasons that drive people from their place of origin and draw them elsewhere. A young man who can’t find a job in Guatemala may have extra incentive to leave if gang violence is encroaching, or an earthquake has devastated his village, or a bank note is coming due; on the “pull” side, he’s more likely to head for the US if he already has a brother there, or if the US construction industry is booming, or if he thinks it will only get harder to cross the border in the future.

“It’s an accumulation of factors, not necessarily A, B, or C,” said Jorge Peraza Breedy, the International Organization for Migration’s chief of mission for the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. It’s important to address the needs of those who are returned to their country, he said in an interview with NotiCen, “so that they do not feel the need to emigrate again.” In other words, he added, not leaving also has to become a viable alternative.

That’s not always the case now. “It’s hard here in Guatemala,” said Yolanda Rivas, 26, who was deported in early April, after being detained in Hidalgo, Texas, and held for three weeks in a detention center in Taylor. The US$7,500 she paid the coyote, or smuggler—she got a bank loan by putting up her family’s home as collateral—bought her three crossing attempts, and this was her second deportation. Right after she landed back on Guatemalan soil, she wasn’t sure what she was going to do next, but a couple of weeks later she had made up her mind.

“With all the debt I have, I think I will give it another go,” she said in a phone interview from the house where she lives with her parents and three younger siblings near Huehuetenango, in Guatemala’s Western Highlands. She added that the interest on the debt was growing and that if they lost the house to the bank, her family would have nowhere to live. “I don’t have a choice,” she said. “Sometimes you don’t even know what you’re getting into.”

Israel Baíl, who is now 46, first went to the US in the late 1990s, after Hurricane Mitch destroyed his crops and he couldn’t make the payments on the bank loan he had taken out for the planting season. “I had to take on more debt to pay the coyote,” he said. Originally from the Western Highlands municipality of Cajolá, he grew up speaking only his Mayan language, Mam. He ended up learning Spanish in New Jersey, during the nine years he worked in restaurants alongside other immigrants.

After becoming involved in efforts to support grassroots development in Cajolá, Baíl decided to “self-deport” back to Guatemala in 2009. “There’s nothing better than to be with your family,” he said. But today he has two sons, ages 20 and 23, working without legal documents in New Jersey. “I
told them not to go, because it’s very hard to live in that country. They didn’t listen to me,” said Baíl, who now divides his time between farming and cooking. As he sees it, “the biggest factor sending young people away is poverty.”

Acknowledging the problem

The region’s governments acknowledge that emigration is a problem. In 2014, spurred by the surge in unaccompanied minors crossing into the United States, the Northern Triangle countries came up with a comprehensive, multiyear plan intended to address some of the structural causes. “Nearly 9% of our population has decided to leave, resulting in a major loss of human capital,” the three countries stated in the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle (NotiCen, April 30, 2015). “For the most part, this flight of our people stems from the lack of economic and job opportunities in our countries, growing violence, and the departure of those who want to reunite with relatives living abroad.”

The United States has earmarked US$750 million in the current fiscal year to support the Alliance for Prosperity, with the bulk of the funds withheld until the governments show concrete progress on a range of issues, including the reintegration of undocumented migrants. Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales, who took office in January, has said that addressing this issue will be one of his priorities (NotiCen, March 17, 2016).

Currently, few services seem to be available for returning migrants, other than a handful of shelters and some limited job training. The Consejo Nacional de Atención al Migrante de Guatemala (National Council for Assistance to Guatemalan Migrants, CONAMIGUA) has an agreement with a vocational school to offer training courses to this population. Last year, it reportedly provided such courses to some 2,500 people. That’s a drop in the bucket, though; in 2015 alone, more than 100,000 Guatemalans were deported back home—31,443 by air from the US and 75,045 by land from Mexico, according to government figures.

In Guatemala City, a fledgling group called the Asociación de Retornados Guatemaltecos (Association of Guatemalan Returnees, ARG) is advocating for more services and programs, stressing that people who have been deported need support if they are going to build a life in Guatemala. “The idea of the association is to turn the American dream into a Guatemalan dream,” explained ARG member Héctor Colindres.

The association is trying to take concrete action, something it says is generally lacking. “We’re not behind a desk or doing studies,” said ARG president Gustavo Juárez. Through an arrangement with a new presidential commission on migration issues, ARG members meet the planeloads of deportees who arrive at Guatemalan Air Force headquarters. They mingle with them in the reception center, partly just to offer a friendly face but also to take down information about what kinds of skills people already have or would want to acquire.

While the ARG and some other nongovernmental organizations say they hope the Alliance for Prosperity will bring more funding and support for returning migrants, others are deeply skeptical that it will make a fundamental difference. After all, they point out, emigration is big business, not just for the coyotes themselves but for the bankers and lawyers who set up the loan arrangements and in many cases end up foreclosing on people’s property.

To complicate matters, those who emigrate successfully contribute to the national economy by sending money to their families and communities. Guatemalans working abroad sent back an
estimated US$6.6 billion in remittances in 2015, according to official figures—close to 10 percent of GDP. In the past, some presidents have even referred to these workers as “national heroes.”

Changing minds

In Quetzaltenango, Guatemala’s second-largest city, a couple of organizations are trying to change the whole mindset behind migration by strengthening or reviving traditional cultural values.

Willy Barreno, co-founder of a group called Desarrollo Sostenible para Guatemala (Sustainable Development for Guatemala, DESGUA), believes that indigenous Guatemalans, in particular, have been taught since colonial times to see themselves as “workers, not visionaries.”

“We don’t believe in ourselves because of the process of colonization,” said Barreno, who himself is of Ki’Che’ and Mam descent. “In Guatemala, young people have not been given a vision.”

DESGUA is trying to change that. Working both with young people who have been deported and with others who might be at risk of emigrating, the organization is trying to counter the narrative that the only option is to go abroad.

Less a formal organization than a network of associations, community groups, and others working for social change, DESGUA runs a café that also serves as a cultural and educational center. Through one project, it provided culinary classes and entrepreneurship training to 15 young people from the area, in hopes that some of them would open businesses in their own communities.

Barreno also has dreams of providing tablets to returning migrants so they can use special apps to acquire knowledge and better reintegrate themselves into society. (Even in most rural communities, Internet access is available for less than US$1 per day.)

Another organization in Quetzaltenango, Colectivo Vida Digna, works in partnership with the US-based Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) to help minors who have been repatriated to Guatemala. Taking a holistic approach, the organization works with the children’s extended families, helping them value their indigenous cultures and discover how they can tap into the economic potential they already have as communities.

When young people go away to the US, they leave behind communities that are deprived of the intelligence of the next generation, said Carlos Escalante, one of Colectivo Vida Digna’s leaders. On a personal level, the youth potentially leave behind their language, their art, their music—the things that “fill the heart with joy,” as Escalante put it. His colleague, Anna Aziza Grewe, added that those who emigrate often end up cutting many ties to family and community, only to do “denigrating” jobs abroad.

“What are they losing on these journeys?” she asked.

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