

Zacatecas Revisited: Transition from International Emigration to a Haven for Returnees and Transit Migrants - A Critical Analysis of the Absence of Public Policies and The Role of Pastoral Philanthropy in Welfare Provision

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Abstract

The article critically analyzes Zacatecas's shift from an emigrant source to a hub for returnees and transit migrants, highlighting the lack of comprehensive public policies for their integration and support. Filling this gap, pastoral philanthropy, particularly through Casa del Migrante, plays a crucial role in aiding these groups despite resource limitations. Utilizing descriptive and qualitative methods, including interviews and documentary research, the study explores Zacatecas's historical emigration context, its transformation into a migrant-receiving area, state policy analysis concerning returnees, and Casa del Migrante's welfare role. It underscores Zacatecas's dependency on remittances and the economic difficulties returnees face, critiquing the government's inadequate response to migrant needs. The article concludes by advocating for a holistic institutional framework that encompasses economic development, migration, and human rights, while acknowledging the vital contributions of civil society and religious organizations in assisting migrants.

Keywords: *Zacatecas, Casa migrante, scalabrinians, pastoral philanthropy.*

1. Introduction

This article analyzes the public policies—or lack thereof—implemented by the government of Zacatecas and relevant institutions concerning the integration and support of international immigrants and returnees within the state. Historically a region sending migrants to the US, Zacatecas now faces an influx of returnees and serves as a transit point for Central American migrants. However, it lacks comprehensive policies for receiving international migrants. Alternative institutions like the pastoral and diocese offer limited support for migrants in transit and returnees. The article stems from documentary research complemented by interviews with public officials and Casa del Migrante personnel. It provides a historical overview of Zacatecas as an emigration source, its transformation into a territory of returnees and transit migrants, and the inadequacy of current state policies. It scrutinizes the needs of migrants from the US and other Mexican states, stressing the urgency of comprehensive support.

The fourth section examines the Casa del Migrante's operations, constrained by limited resources yet crucial in assisting transit migrants. Interviews conducted in June 2021 reveal disparities between government objectives and the Casa del Migrante's pastoral approach. Despite financial constraints, support from Scalabrinians and Oblate mothers' aids migrants, though primarily reliant on charity. The article highlights the need for cohesive governmental action to address the diverse needs of migrants in Zacatecas.

2. Zacatecas: International laboratory for international migration, social organizations, and solidarity projects

Zacatecas, a central-northwest Mexican state, has a long history of emigration to the U.S., dating back to the late 19th century, influenced by its mining and agricultural economy and historical events like the Mexican Revolution. By 1910, 26.6% of Zacatecas's population had migrated to the U.S., the highest rate in Mexico, affecting its demographic composition. The post-World War II Bracero Program further increased this migration.

From the late 1970s to 2006, Zacatecas saw a rise in emigration due to local economic and social crises, and the demand for labor in the U.S. This trend led to migration and remittances becoming key aspects of Zacatecas's economy. By 2022, a significant number of Zacatecans lived in the U.S.

Zacatecan migrant organizations in the U.S. have significantly contributed to Mexican community development, particularly through the 2x1 and 3x1 remittance programs since 1990. However, Mexico's reliance on migrants and remittances highlights the need for comprehensive policies addressing economic development, migration, and human rights. Escobar & Masferrer (2021) noted Mexico's shift from an emigrant to an immigrant country from 2010 to 2020, underscoring the need for policies that integrate returnees, deportees, and migrants in transit or forced to stay in Mexico.

3. Zacatecas. From massive emigration to the growing return and emergency of migrants in transit

The 2010 U.S. financial crisis led to significant changes in migration, especially towards Mexico, with around 4 million returns and deportations from 2008 to 2018. Zacatecas saw about 40,000 returnees annually between 2008 and 2010, challenging reintegration at various levels. Reintegration is complicated by Mexico's ongoing economic crisis since 1982, marked by high unemployment and a large informal economy (55.2% in 2022), social inequality, and rising violence. Zacatecas, despite its mining sector contributing 40% to its GDP, faces economic challenges with a -9.1% state GDP decline from 2016 to 2020, 62% labor informality, and low average wages (4,600 pesos or 230 USD in 2020). Zacatecas, part of a region contributing nearly 30% of the national GDP, faces structural economic weaknesses and limited public investment.

Iturriaga and Gutiérrez (2021) note an -81.3% decrease in state capital spending over the past decade. The state's economy heavily relies on remittances, which play a crucial role in its financial ecosystem as explored by Wise et al (2006), Binford (2002), and Lopez et al (2020), who discuss remittance dependency and its multifaceted impacts, including countercyclical effects during COVID-19.

The previous scenario puts return migration and deportees as a national challenge, especially for states like Zacatecas with high migration and great dependence on remittances. As shown by the information from the Bank of Mexico (2022) in the third quarter of 2022, the Zacatecas municipalities with the highest income from remittances were Fresnillo (US 44.7M), Zacatecas (US 37.9M) and Juan Aldama (US 35.5M).

According to INEGI (2021) In 2020, 22,482 people left Zacatecas to live in another country, and 96 out of 100 went to the United States of America. Nationwide, 802,807 were registered, of which 77 out of 100 went to the United States of America. This shows the high rate of the Zacatecas population migrating to the United States. In this sense, the construction of the migratory intensity index was developed by CONAPO in the year 2000. The index is the result of the combination of four variables:

- 1.-Households that receive remittances.
- 2.-Migrants residing in the United States.

3.-Circular migrants.

4.-Returning migrants.

One aspect that draws attention is the existence of households that receive remittances, which in some municipalities reach more than 30%, such as Susticacán and Francisco R. Munguía.

This leads to the conclusion that considering the household that receives remittances, and their income while helping to meet their needs at the origin, there is an extreme dependence on the destination.

Table 1:

Migration intensity index 2020		
State Name	Zacatecas	Jalisco
Total Number of Houses	443,484	2 318,144
% Households that receive remittances in 2020	13,24%	6,76%
% Households with emigrants bound for the United States residing in the United States	3,044%	1,276%
% Households with circular migrants from the United States	0,877%	0,430%
Value of the Migration Intensity Index	15,89	19,71
Migration Intensity Index Degree	Very High	Medium
Position held by the entity at the national level	1	14
% Households with return migrants from the United States	1,890%	0,928%

Source: CONAPO - 2020 Migration Intensity Index. Developed by the authors.

<https://datos.gob.mx/busca/organization/conapo>

Confronted with the conspicuous nature of the migratory phenomenon within the region of Zacatecas, the state government is compelled to establish institutions dedicated to the welfare and support of migrants hailing from Zacatecas.

4. The strategically situated ethnography as a methodological and analytical approach

This study employs a strategically positioned ethnography, inspired by Marcus (1995), with a focus on Zacatecas, Mexico's capital. It transcends traditional locale-centric approaches, aiming to comprehensively understand migration phenomena through a targeted territorial perspective. The research critically analyzes Zacatecas as a key site for examining the effectiveness of migration policies and assimilation strategies for international migrants. It evaluates the approaches of various governmental levels, assessing the outcomes of their interventions.

The methodology's strength lies in its capacity to surpass the constraints of conventional ethnographic methods, offering a nuanced framework to decode complex human mobility patterns, including both intra-national and transnational movements. This is accomplished through a multilayered analytical lens spanning municipal, state, national, and global contexts. The research involves participatory observation and semi-structured interviews, encompassing diverse stakeholders such as migrant shelter personnel and officials from Zacatecas' Migration Secretariat.

A total of 14 interviews were conducted, including with SENAMI officials, a migrant house director, Honduran, and Guatemalan migrants, primarily in locations near railway routes and migrant shelters. This approach yields a multidimensional understanding of the migration phenomenon, contributing significantly to the discourse on migration across

various geographical and political dimensions. The interviews revealed that for migrants, Zacatecas is primarily a transitory location, marked by an urgency to pass through due to prevalent violence and criminality. None expressed intentions to settle permanently in Zacatecas, with the United States as their ultimate destination. Participant selection utilized 'snowball' sampling, ensuring access to crucial individuals through organic and intensifying interactions. This strategy provided a representative depiction of the community. To determine the interview scope, the principle of qualitative data saturation was applied, supplemented by triangulation of data and methodologies, ensuring the authenticity and reliability of the ethnographic findings.

5. Transient Existences: Analyzing Migrant Vulnerabilities in the Zones of Non-Being and Grey Areas

In the 20th and 21st centuries, there has been a notable intensification of global migratory movements, largely attributable to processes of accumulation by dispossession, a concept articulated by Harvey (2004). This phenomenon compels vulnerable populations to migrate, a concept framed by Sassen (2015) as "expulsions," an inherent characteristic of global capitalism. This economic system, driven by capital accumulation, necessitates new markets and resource exploration, leading to processes that adversely affect individuals, communities, and ecosystems. Additionally, the acts of violence of state, institutional, and criminal groups are direct consequences of capitalist accumulation. Central American migrants, passing through Zacatecas and interviewed in this study, originate from regions with severe violence, limited opportunities, and institutional weakness.

Migration thus emerges as a survival strategy, seeking better economic conditions and a dignified life. Academic literature extensively explores this concept, with significant contributions from Townsend (1979) and Alba (1982). In "Migración, clase social y estructura ocupacional en la Ciudad de México," Alba discusses migration as a survival strategy for the economically disadvantaged in Mexico. Similarly, Durand (1986) examines international migration within Mexico, suggesting it as a survival mechanism for improving living conditions.

Migrants adopting this strategy face complex, perilous decisions, including diversifying travel routes and transportation modes while navigating through Mexico, often marked by violence and risks due to lack of legal documentation. This juncture calls for referencing Fanon's concept of "zones of non-being," which encapsulates the exclusion and alienation endured by migrants in transit, existing in liminal spaces between their origins and destinations. Scholars like Sharma (2008) and Zambrano (2010) have extensively engaged with this concept. Zambrano, in "Migración y subjetividad: Zonas del no ser en los relatos de migrantes ecuatorianos," applies this concept to Ecuadorian migrants' narratives, suggesting their experiences within these zones during migration.

In conclusion, the theoretical frameworks of "zones of non-being" and "grey zones" intersect, highlighting three principal characteristics defining the migrant experience: legal ambiguity, economic vulnerability, and social marginalization. These elements collectively create a complex and challenging landscape for migrants in transit, who face numerous obstacles and precarious conditions in their quest for a stable and improved life. de migrantes ecuatorianos," applies this concept to Ecuadorian migrants' narratives, suggesting their experiences within these zones during migration.

6. Government of Zacatecas and Its Constrained Human Mobility Assistance Initiatives

Established on September 3, 1999, Zacatecas' State Institute of Migration underwent several name changes, ultimately becoming the Zacatecano Migrant Secretariat (SEZAMI) in June 2018. Over two decades, this Secretariat has concentrated on information and assistance programs, dedicated to protecting the interests of the Zacatecas migrant community and their families. This includes providing advice concerning national and foreign authorities and informing about migrants' rights and obligations.

Despite its long-standing presence, there is a discernible lack of commitment from both federal and state governments in formulating support and reintegration policies for returned migrants. The initiatives spearheaded by SEZAMI are largely welfare-oriented, focusing on services such as transfer payments from the national border and one-time financial aid. Efforts also include facilitating reinsertion into jobs near the U.S. border, like in call centers or maquiladoras, indicative of the state's limited interest in providing comprehensive welfare for all citizens, including returnees.

Research conducted at SEZAMI in 2020 aimed to understand the integration, assistance, and support plans for deported migrants, returnees, or international immigrants. Interviews conducted in June 2021 with SEZAMI personnel revealed that their programs are tailored exclusively for migrants originating from Zacatecas, excluding those from other regions or countries. The support for returned or deported Zacatecos mainly comprises workforce re-engagement, offering a single payment of USD 250 for men and USD 390 for women. In 2021, 140 aids amounting to USD 37,168.00 were disbursed, benefiting 5 women and 135 men. Additional services include job reinsertion advice, entrepreneurship courses, and assistance in obtaining Mexican documentation.

SEZAMI's current portfolio lacks integration programs or plans for foreign migrants or internal movers, nor does it offer other types of financial aid, health, education, canteens, or related services. Regarding migrant caravans or migrants from other countries, SEZAMI, recognizing the precarious, dangerous, and complicated realities of people in human mobility, refers such cases to other entities like the Red Cross or DIF at the state level. Emphasizing the precarious needs of Zacatecas migrants, their focus remains distinctly on this demographic (personal interview with Leon, June 2021).

Table 2

Information on support delivered from SEZAMI to deportees from the year 2016

YEARS: 2016		2017		2018		2019		2020		2021	
Subsidies	Amount in USD*	Subsidies	Amount in USD*	Subsidies	Amount in USD*	Subsidies	Amount in USD*	Subsidies	Amount in USD*	Subsidies	Amount in USD*
710	73,841	1732	\$180.14	1268	\$134.06	466	\$514.28	776	\$104.00	280	\$71.50

*in thousands of dollars
Source: SEZAMI, 2021

Table 2 in the study illustrates the inconsistent nature of aid from the Secretariat of the Zacatecan Migrant (SEZAMI), with a notable increase in 2017 but a subsequent decline during the 2020-2021 pandemic. This fluctuation may stem from limited awareness among returned/deported migrants and inadequate communication channels used by SEZAMI. The aid provided is merely palliative, considering the scarcity of job opportunities, prevalence of informal employment, and the lack of a robust productive and industrial infrastructure in the state to offer opportunities to migrants, many of whom return with new skills acquired abroad.

This research, undertaken by scholars from the Autonomous University of Zacatecas and five other states, critically analyzes the impacts of return migration in Mexico, with a focus on employment, health, education, family, and community integration. It highlights the urgent need for a Comprehensive Reintegration Program for Migrants and their

Families in regions with high rates of return migration, emphasizing labor reintegration in six Mexican states. The study also critiques the Zacatecas state government's migration policies, such as the "Corazón de Plata" program, which aims to reunite migrant families but is limited by restrictive eligibility criteria and lacks a guarantee of visa approval. This program's limitations and the absence of initiatives for foreign migrants illustrate the government's inadequate response to comprehensive migration challenges.

7. The philanthropic role of the Scalabrinians and the migrant house

It is important to point out that in the scenario described in Zacatecas since 2010 and 2011, at the initiative of the Zacatecano migrant organizations and the Social Pastoral Ministry of the Catholic Church, three Seminars on Migratory Pastoral Care were held (2011, 2012, and 2013) with the participation of the missionaries scalabrinians, local deputies, some mayors, the State Migration Institute, federal deputies and researchers from the Universidad Autonoma de Zacatecas. At the end of these events, it was agreed to make a joint effort to build the Casa del Migrante to support returned and deported migrants and the incipient Central American migration that was beginning to transit through Zacatecas towards the northern border. Established through the efforts of Bishop Daniel Ayala Talamantes and federal congressional lobbying, the Casa del Migrante in Zacatecas, despite limited state and municipal support, has evolved from a dining room facility (2015-2017) to the "Casa del Migrante Sembrando Esperanzas," encompassing comprehensive amenities for migrants. This expansion includes bedrooms, dining areas, bathrooms, medical and psychological services, with future plans for educational and training facilities. The advent of migrant caravans in December 2018 marked a significant shift in Mexican immigration patterns, with Zacatecas becoming a pivotal transit point and the Casa del Migrante, supported by the Social Pastoral, emerging as a vital institution for migrant assistance.

In response to the state government's lack of migrant aid programs, the Zacatecas bishopric initiated the Casa del Migrante, leading to the formation of the Foundation for Human Mobility and Community Development. This initiative garnered support from diverse stakeholders, including federal and state authorities, volunteers, the Red Cross, and the Universidad Autonoma de Zacatecas. The Scalabrinians play a key role in this context, hosting 120 individuals, particularly returnees, deportees, and transitory migrants. Leadership under Father Daniel Ayala and Mother Irene Jimenez has been crucial in sustaining operational alliances.

Interviews in June 2021 with Casa del Migrante and State Secretariat for Migrants' personnel underscored its significant role amid increasing transit migration and COVID-19 challenges, operating without government support. The facility has continued its mission amidst contrasting objectives with the National Institute of Migration, focusing on aid and shelter, especially for Central American migrants, in stark contrast to the Institute's securitization approach.

8. Conclusions

In the past decade, Mexico has transformed into a country marked by varied patterns of human mobility, posing significant challenges to its governance. This shift requires the creation of a comprehensive institutional framework that addresses economic development, migration, and human rights, with a particular focus on migrant integration. Since 2010, various entities such as transnational civil society, NGOs, religious institutions, migrant associations, and academics have suggested policy initiatives emphasizing human rights and the integration of migrants across the country.

The months of August and September 2023 witnessed a surge in migration through Mexico's southern border, predominantly Central Americans, aiming for the U.S. This led to the increased use of railroads, dubbed the new "Beast of the North," for their cost-effectiveness despite the inherent dangers. This phenomenon resulted in a significant number of migrants entering the U.S. via Eagle Pass and El Paso, Texas. It prompted a strategic meeting between U.S. and Mexican migration authorities in Ciudad Juárez to manage these migratory flows. The Mexican government's response included reducing train transportation for migrants, increasing border militarization, and accommodating a higher number of deportees from the U.S.

During this period, Zacatecas emerged as an alternative railway route for migrants heading north. Despite the daily transit of hundreds, their engagement with Zacatecas was minimal, evidenced by the lack of interaction with local migrant support facilities. Local civil society groups responded by providing essential supplies, while authorities aimed to manage the security implications of these transient populations.

This increase in transmigrant flows through Mexico underscores the urgent need for a Comprehensive Migration Policy that integrates development and human rights. Such a policy would reform the legal framework to improve asylum access, considering the over 200,000 applications that have strained the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) and other agencies.

Managing this situation effectively calls for enhanced coordination among Mexican governmental levels and greater collaboration with civil society organizations assisting migrants. International cooperation, including efforts like the Palenque Summit in Chiapas, involving Mexico and various Central and South American countries, is crucial.

A comprehensive strategy akin to the Marshall Plan is required to address the root causes of migration in Central America and southern Mexico. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)'s 2020 proposal, commissioned by Mexico, provides a solid basis for this strategy. The establishment of the Casa del Migrante in Zacatecas highlights the value of collaborative efforts in developing new migration policies. The active participation of diverse stakeholders, particularly civil society, is essential in crafting effective immigration policies and addressing the complexities of current migration trends in the region.

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