From Oaxaca to Ontario: Mexican Contract Labor in Canada and the Impact at Home

by

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Abstract

Each year thousands of Mexican laborers work under contract in agricultural jobs for several months in the province of Ontario, Canada, returning home with thousands of dollars in savings. First, this report examines how the Caribbean Commonwealth and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program is structured and operated, with perspectives from workers, employers, and Mexican and Canadian officials. It then continues with an analysis of how this highly organized employment of labor in Canada has affected various spheres of life in one rural Oaxacan community that is heavily involved in all types of labor migration.
From Oaxaca to Ontario:
Mexican Contract Labor in Canada and the Impact at Home

In 1974, 40-year old Don Daniel Reyes left his remote, indigenous village in southern Mexico for a four-month, contract agricultural job in Canada. He had worked in Mexico City and been a bracero four times in the United States during the 1950's. He continued with seasonal work in California after the program ended. His work experiences in the United States were usually characterized by long hours, living in gullies or fields in makeshift shacks, heavy drinking, avoiding immigration officials, working for a medley of employers with varying degrees of honesty, and meager wages to send to his family. In contrast, in Canada the hours and pay were guaranteed, as were housing, transportation, health insurance and a pension plan. He says his job in Canada gave him what he has today: financial stability through ownership of a transport truck and store, agricultural lands to use or lease, and a two-story cinder block house in the community's center.

This two-part report is designed to describe and to enable a better understanding of the structure and impact of contract labor migration from Mexico to Canada. Various types and destinations of labor migration are characterized by different risks and consequences for migrants, their families, and their home communities. Part One, Contract Labor in Canada, provides an overview of the Caribbean Commonwealth and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, a well-established agricultural contract labor program between Canada and several developing countries, including Mexico. Part Two, View From the Community, examines the effects of the program on a small, rural, indigenous community in Oaxaca. It gives insight as to how Canadian contract labor and other types of labor migration have contributed to changing women's roles, household structure, economic activity, agricultural practices, education, religious beliefs and local political structure. Although these ramifications may not be present in every community affected by migration, this report provides an initial framework with which to study the positive and negative aspects of organized labor migration.¹

¹ Data for this report are from interviews collected in 1994 and 1995 from communities in southern Mexico that have high percentages of laborers in Canada and the United States, and in 1995 from officials, administrators, workers and employers on farms in Ontario.
Part One: Contract Labor in Canada

The Caribbean Commonwealth and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program

The current contract agricultural labor agreement between Canada and Mexico was signed in 1971, adding Mexico to a list of countries participating in a program that first began in 1966 with a contract between Jamaica and Canada.\(^2\) In 1994, a total of 10,839 contract labor positions in Ontario were filled by workers from Barbados, the Eastern Caribbean countries,\(^3\) Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Mexico (Figure 1) employed in four general sectors: tobacco, vegetables, fruit orchards and greenhouse mixed crops.\(^4\) Today the program is administered by the Foreign Agricultural Research Management Services, or FARMS, a federal non-profit service organization in Mississauga, Ontario. FARMS was authorized in 1987 by Employment and Immigration Canada specifically to act as administrator, watchdog, and worker processor for seasonal agricultural workers.

![Figure 1: Nationalities of Workers in 1994](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barbados</th>
<th>Eastern Caribbean</th>
<th>Jamaica</th>
<th>Trinidad and Tobago</th>
<th>Sub-Total Caribbean</th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>671</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>4,698</td>
<td>893</td>
<td>6,673</td>
<td>4,166</td>
<td>10,839</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although a contract program, the Canadian seasonal agricultural labor program has few, if any, similarities with the Bracero program the operated between Mexico and the United States from 1942 to 1964. Specific contract agreements safeguard against abuses and contribute to a program hoping to satisfy all involved parties, not just Canadian employers and officials. Still, the logistical complexity of the program, embedded in an intercultural and international setting, is not without its shortcomings.

A simplified overview of how the program operates is useful. First, the Canadian Ministry of Labor sets the total number of workers allowed into the country each year for seasonal agricul-

\(^2\) This paper focuses on Ontario, the province with the largest number of foreign seasonal agricultural workers, although foreign agricultural contract labor can be found throughout the Canadian provinces.

\(^3\) The Eastern Caribbean States are Antigua and Barbuda, The Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, Saint Kitts-Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and The Grenadines.

\(^4\) Commodities harvested, produced, packaged, or processed by foreign workers: Fruit (not apples): blueberries, cherries, grapes, peaches, plums and prunes, raspberries, strawberries; Vegetables: asparagus, green beans, wax beans, beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, sweet corn, cucumber, lettuce, lima beans, onions, parsnips, green peas, peppers, potatoes, radishes, rutabagas, spinach, tomatoes; Greenhouse vegetables: cucumber, peppers, tomato; Tobacco: flue cured, burley, dark; Nursery: nursery stock; Apples; Ginseng. Source: FARMS, 1995. The Quest for a Reliable Workforce in the Horticulture Industry: Annexes.
cultural labor, considering both the requests of the farmers and the levels of national and local unemployment. Canadian agricultural employers who wish for foreign agricultural labor contact Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) counselors, and if their labor requests are accepted, they sign contracts with FARMS requesting workers of specific nationalities.

There appears to be a correlation between the type of horticulture and the nationality of workers chosen by employers. According to FARMS, the greenhouse and vegetable employers generally request Mexicans, while those working in the fruit industry tend to hire Caribbean workers, with the idea that Caribbean workers are taller and are more efficient in the orchards than the Mexicans, who some employers claim are better suited for work in greenhouses and row crops. In 1994 only a small number of farmers (approximately forty) requested both Caribbean and Mexican workers, although due to fears of problems stemming from linguistic and cultural differences they chose to house them separately.

FARMS coordinates the interactions between the employer, the Ministry of Labor and the representatives of the workers' countries, which in Mexico's case is the Consulate of Mexico in Toronto. Contracts between Canada and the labor-sending country (which is alone responsible for the recruitment policy for workers) are reviewed or renegotiated annually. Workers receive a guaranteed salary, equal to their Canadian counterparts, guaranteed number of hours of employment, transportation, housing, Canadian health insurance and enrollment in the Canadian Pension Plan, discussed in further detail below. When workers arrive in Toronto, their employers meet them at the airport, transport them to their jobs and on-site housing, and prepare them for work the next day.

Since one of the goals of the program is to minimize the amount of turnover in seasonal labor in order to decrease training time and increase productivity, workers are evaluated by their employers, who may request them by name the following year. Workers with poor evaluations are not allowed back into the program and their positions are made available to new applicants. Currently the program has approximately a 15% turnover rate.

On the Mexican labor end of the program, applicants must first apply in person at the corresponding office in Mexico City. If potential workers meet the initial requirements, they must pass an annual health exam, after which their names are sent to the Mexican Consulate in Toronto, which then coordinates the process with FARMS. Workers may not request specific types of work or the length of their contract.

**Interests of the Canadian Government and Canadian Horticulture**

Employers, workers and the Canadian government all seek to benefit from this program, although each group has its own interests. The main goal of the Canadian government, represented by FARMS, is to provide Canadian horticulture employers with a reliable workforce with minimal turnover, and to promote growth and production within the industry and economy as a
whole. In recent years there has been an increase in greenhouse crop production with a tendency towards specialization in one or two vegetables. Many of these crops are extremely perishable, thus plentiful labor is often the critical factor to successful harvests. In 1994, the Canadian horticulture industry produced $670.22 million\(^5\) of commodities, with farmers investing $456.04 million in seedstocks, chemicals, equipment and other goods and services. After harvest, another $10.49 billion worth of economic impact through food processing follows (FARMS 1995a: 2).

FARMS believes the lack of a reliable Canadian labor force is what is holding back the horticulture industry, which is not working at 100% of its capacity or efficiency. Although 90% of the horticulture jobs are filled by Canadians, in 1994 there were still 9,876 crucial jobs available, making the seasonal offshore workers from Mexico and the Caribbean the “keystone” of the horticulture industry and of a complete harvest according to FARMS (Figure 2). According to FARMS and many employers, with the offshore program the horticulture industry will prosper, without it the industry will stagnate and decline.

FARMS statistics state that every horticultural worker in the industry (including the seasonal offshore workers) represents $89,496 of economic activity per year, or $7,285 of value to the Canadian economy per month per worker with an estimated total impact of $182,125,000 (FARMS 1995a:6).

**Figure 2: Crops, Employers and Foreign Workers in 1994**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop</th>
<th>Workers</th>
<th>Employers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fruit (not apples)</td>
<td>1,533</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetable</td>
<td>2,097</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>3,719</td>
<td>576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenhouse</td>
<td>511</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canning and Food Processing</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apples</td>
<td>1,947</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginseng</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>10,839</td>
<td>1,456</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although critics of the program say that jobs are being taken from Canadians (in 1996 Canada had a 9.4% level of unemployment), most farmers report that they are unable to find Canadian workers willing to do the strenuous agricultural labor for such relatively short, yet intense, periods of time. Some employers have experienced situations where local workers

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\(^5\) Throughout this report Canadian Dollars have been converted to U.S. Dollars at the 1995 exchange rate of 1:0.728. It is important to note that a recent and a continuing drop of the Canadian Dollar as compared to the U.S. Dollar has financial repercussions for the foreign contract laborers working in Canada, who remit their earnings to their home country in U.S. Dollars and experience a loss in purchasing power.
stayed only long enough to qualify for unemployment benefits, leaving the farmer with unfinished planting or harvesting, and resulting in economic loss for the farmer, processors and consumers. Local newspaper articles further emphasize that farmers need the offshore labor (see Barrett 1996).

FARMS has responded to criticisms of the program with studies illustrating that the Ontario horticulture industry provides employment for 99,876 people per year, but with the average duration of only ten weeks (FARMS 1995a: 1). FARMS also estimates that each farm worker supports 2.6 jobs in the supply and processing sectors, jobs held mainly by Canadians (FARMS 1995a: 2). FARMS notes that “most of the upstream and downstream jobs are skilled labour, permanent positions with relatively high wages and definable career paths. All of these features are attractive to Canadian workers” (FARMS 1995a: 2). Although there is a Canada-First Policy of Human Resources Development, which says that “every Canadian horticulture employer would prefer to hire a RELIABLE Canadian, rather than an offshore worker;” (FARMS 1995a: 4) there are simply not enough reliable Canadian workers.

One farmer, who specializes in greenhouse grown peppers and tomatoes, said,

You can’t find workers here who will stick out the job. Maybe they’ll stay for a week or two. Then they say it’s too hard on their backs, or they think that they are better than this kind of work. I’ve had Mexican workers for the last five years. Hard workers. Even when the temperature in summer in the greenhouses nears one hundred, they still keep working and won’t complain. Honest people. I owe this greenhouse business to them.

This farmer’s six workers live in a small, neat wooden house two hundred feet from the greenhouses. The first two workers arrive each year in mid-February, followed by four more in March. Each day they work in the two acres of greenhouses, harvesting bell peppers and tomatoes, sorting them by quality and packing them into boxes for shipment to Toronto and the northern United States. The workers cook and clean for themselves, and on Sunday their employer sometimes takes them with him to the Catholic church, after which they all go grocery shopping. All six men leave in September, having earned an average of $8,013.50 each. Most of this gets sent or brought home to their families and communities (Figure 3).

Canada also benefits through the farm workers’ local spending during their residence in Ontario. It is estimated that in 1994 out of gross earnings of $50,616,619, approximately $24,499,145 of the workers’ wages were spent in Ontario local economies (FARMS 1995b:Annex D). For example, in the regional municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk, 3,683 workers spent an average of $3,278 each in the local economy, totaling $12,073,795 (FARMS 1995b:Annex E).

The Canadian government also considers the remittances sent home, totaling an estimated 21,855,000 Canadian dollars from 10,839 workers in 1994, as part of its foreign assistance (FARMS 1995a: 5).
Figure 3: Offshore Workers' Income in 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th># Workers</th>
<th>Pay/Worker (Average Gross)</th>
<th>Gross Wages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fruits</td>
<td>1,653</td>
<td>$5,028</td>
<td>$9,633,684</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>1,977</td>
<td>$5,505</td>
<td>$10,883,928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenhouse Vegetables</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>$9,082</td>
<td>$4,559,269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco</td>
<td>3,719</td>
<td>$4,735</td>
<td>$17,610,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursery</td>
<td>267</td>
<td>$7,984</td>
<td>$2,131,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing</td>
<td>534</td>
<td>$2,142</td>
<td>$1,143,716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apples</td>
<td>1,947</td>
<td>$1,484</td>
<td>$2,889,259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ginseng</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>$7,984</td>
<td>$1,764,544</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>10,820</td>
<td></td>
<td>$50,616,619</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey of Producers and Commodity Associations as reported in FARMS 1995b: Annex C.

Interests of the Mexican Workers and the Mexican Government

The interests of the Mexican workers currently or previously involved in the contract program are simple: to have steady, relatively well-paid, safe jobs to support their families in Mexico. All of the current or past participants in contract labor to Canada, interviewed in their places of employment in Canada or at home in Mexico, were married and had children in Mexico. Over 90% had previously worked in urban areas of Mexico or in urban or rural areas of the United States. Over 85% of the workers felt that contract labor jobs in Canada benefited them more than working either documented or undocumented in the United States, due to higher wages, job security and the included transportation and housing.

The Mexican Consulate in Toronto gave three main goals for Mexico's participation in the contract labor program. First, to alleviate household poverty, even if at the micro level, to help slow rural-urban migration within Mexico and to reduce pressure for undocumented migration to the United States. Second, to provide Mexican workers with the opportunity to learn and bring home some aspects of Canadian technology, agriculture, and culture. Third, to allow this program to serve as a demonstration of orderly, controlled, and just labor migration. Although on a small scale, the program does seem to be meeting the first and third goals, the degree of success in meeting the second objective has been much more variable. The impact of contract labor in Canada on Mexican workers, their families and the sending community, including examples of transfers of technology and culture, are discussed in Part Two: View From the Community.

The Contract

There are two, practically identical contracts involved with the Seasonal Workers Agricultural Program. One between the Canadian government, the employer and government agent of
the labor-providing country, and the other between the employer, the worker and the government agent. The *Agreement for the Employment in Canada of Seasonal Agricultural Workers From Mexico* is a document issued by Employment and Immigration Canada, which outlines the responsibilities of all parties involved in contract labor between Mexico and Canada. The following are some basic points found in all the contracts (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1995).

**Scope and Period of Employment**
- The employer agrees to hire the worker(s) for not less than 240 hours in 6 weeks or less.
- A working day will not exceed eight hours, but the employer may request longer hours "and the worker may agree to extend his/her hours if the urgency of the situation requires it." The employer must make sure to give "the same rights to Mexican workers as to Canadian workers."
- For each six days of work, the worker is entitled to one day of rest, but in certain situations the employer may request that the worker postpone that day.
- The employer will provide the worker with a copy of rules of conduct, safety, discipline, and care and maintenance of property.
- The worker will not be moved to another area, or loaned or transferred to another employer, without the consent of the worker and written approval from the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission and the government agent.

**Lodging and Meals**
- The employer must provide suitable accommodations without cost, which must meet with the approval of the appropriate government authority responsible for health and living conditions in that region. In the absence of such authority, accommodations must meet with approval of the Mexican government agent.
- The employer must provide reasonable and proper meals, or where the workers elect to prepare their own meals the employer must furnish cooking utensils, fuel, and facilities without cost to the worker. A minimum of thirty minutes must be given for meal breaks.

**Payment of Wages**
- The employer must pay weekly the greatest of the following: minimum wage, the prevailing wage rate for the type of agricultural work, or the same rate that is being paid to Canadian workers doing the same type of work (Figure 4).

**Deductions**
- Within the first 30 days the employer can recover the $91.07 of Visa costs through paycheck deductions.
- After the first 30 days, the employer can deduct 4% of gross wages per pay period
towards the airfare costs, not totaling more than $200.34.

- In cases where the employer provides food instead of having workers cook for themselves, the employer may not deduct more than $4.74 per day for the cost of meals provided to a worker.
  - Health insurance deductions of $0.34 per day per worker.
  - As with all workers in Canada, there are also minimal Canada Pension Plan (C.P.P.) deductions, and Employment Insurance (E.I.) deductions (see Appendix A).

**Travel and Reception**

- The employer agrees to pay the round trip airfare to the travel agent, and will meet the worker on his arrival to Canada. In 1995, round trip airfare per Mexican worker, paid by the employer, was $501.59.
  - The employer agrees to take the worker, or have him taken, to the airport when he leaves.

**Obligations of the Worker**

- To perform the duties of the job efficiently.
- To work for only the officially designated person.
- To maintain living quarters in a state of cleanliness.
- To return home at the end of the contract.

The contract also details the management of events such as fire, serious injuries, health conditions or death, the disappearance of workers from their jobs, terms for breach of contract, emergencies at home, and loans to workers by employers.

**Figure 4: 1995 Prevailing Agricultural Wage Rate and Approved Employment Periods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crop</th>
<th>Wage Rate</th>
<th>Duration of Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco-Flue</td>
<td>$49.17/Kiln (includes emptying kiln)</td>
<td>July-November*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$5.00/hr (includes planting and all hourly paid duties)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobacco-Black</td>
<td>$6.00/hr (harvest) $5.00/hr (planting)</td>
<td>July-November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canning/Food Processing</td>
<td>$5.00/hr</td>
<td>July-November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurseries</td>
<td>$5.00/hr</td>
<td>April-November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegetables (includes ginseng)</td>
<td>$5.00/hr</td>
<td>April-November</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenhouse vegetables</td>
<td>$6.85/hr</td>
<td>February-September</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruit (includes apples)</td>
<td>$6.85/hr</td>
<td>April-November</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Workers are allowed in May for planting if at least 240 hours of work are guaranteed.

Source: FARMS 1995c.
Challenges to the Program

Although both well-organized and long-established, there is room for improvement within the program. This need for continual reevaluation is recognized, leading to contracts that are renegotiated between Canada and the labor-sending country each year. FARMS hopes to have the means to monitor conditions on all farms in the program and to take a more active guidance and supervisory role.

One stumbling block is that neither FARMS nor any branch of the Canadian government has any control over recruitment policies in the labor sending countries. In interviews, Mexican participants consistently reported unjust hiring practices and corruption in the corresponding office in Mexico City. There, all officials but one administrator refused my requests for interviews, and this conversation was cut short by another official stating that the program was government-related and could not be discussed. Comments from the administrator in this one brief exchange were later determined as inaccurate. One such statement was that because of the large applicant pool, only married males are considered, and the more children they have, the more likely they are to be admitted into the program. This is neither a FARMS, nor an official Mexican requirement.

The same administrator said that Canadian officials had unilaterally stopped accepting women because they were afraid that Mexican women would entrapar or trap Canadian citizens into marrying them as a means to stay in the country. In spite of such statements to the contrary, women are still included in the program (Figure 5). Mexican officials in Toronto apologized for the inaccuracy and aura of secrecy in the Mexico City office, and insist that both men and women are welcome in the program if at least eighteen and married, or twenty-four if not married, and as long as they pass the health requirements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>1994</th>
<th>1995</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barbados</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Caribbean</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad/Tobago</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>77</strong></td>
<td><strong>84</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*mostly employed in fruit and canning/food processing

Source: C. Szeminski, FARMS, personal communication, 1996.

Stories from the workers illustrate the difficulty of securing a coveted position in the program. One Mexican elementary school teacher and agriculturist said that he was rejected
from the program after they examined his hands, which were no longer callused. He also believed that he was rejected because he was an outspoken teacher, and an organizer, known for defending human rights and denouncing unjust conditions.

Previously-accepted participants advised their friends to apply with a very humble, quiet demeanor and a “donation” of money. Advice given to one new applicant by his father, now retired from working in Canada, was,

When you go to the office you must wear your older clothes, clean, but older. Wear your farming shoes, or even huaraches. You must look like a campesino, like you can work hard. They need to see that you are used to planting and harvesting and working long hours.

For rural workers, the process of application is long and drawn-out, usually lasting a year. Applicants are faced with numerous unofficial costs, since everything must be done in person. In total, it is not unusual for a potential worker to make five or six inefficient trips to Mexico City, averaging thirty dollars each in travel expenses, before leaving for Canada. Once in Mexico City, most applicants are able to stay with relatives in the outskirts of the city to defray hotel expenses. After waiting hours at the contract labor office in a line which formed before daylight, most are disappointed when they reach the inquiry desk to hear that the program is not currently accepting applicants, but to come back in two weeks and try again.

Once workers are able to apply, they must again return in person to see if they have been accepted into the program, at which time a health exam is scheduled, requiring yet a third costly trip to the city on yet a different date. The health screening consists primarily of X-rays of the chest, back and limbs to detect limiting physical conditions, tuberculosis, and to evaluate the applicant’s ability to withstand the long hours and tedious, hard physical labor.

The Mexican consulate in Toronto is aware of some of the problems in the managing office in Mexico City, and hopes they will be rectified soon. However, they are facing their own challenges. Different countries participating in Canada’s contract labor program have various degrees of involvement at the employer-worker level on the farm. For example, Jamaica’s government officials consistently visit all workplaces to inspect living conditions where Jamaican workers are employed. The Mexican consulate, on the other hand, has a much smaller staff, and many places that employ Mexican workers have never been checked by government agents, especially in locations distant from Toronto. In 1991, seven Mexican workers were sent home after walking away from their jobs. They said that they had attempted to contact the Mexican consulate concerning problems with their employer, yet no assistance came. Misinformed, they assumed they could leave and find work elsewhere in the region.

Another challenge for the Mexican government officials in Mexico City and Toronto is that the officials are removed from understanding the realities facing most Mexican workers in the program. Although from the same country, there exist social, cultural and even ethnic differ-
ences between program administrators and workers, which can make it very difficult for Mexican officials to adequately represent and understand the workers, an unknown percentage of whom are indigenous with distinct, unique cultures of prehispanic origin. One example is that many small Mexican villages, sometimes indigenous, are governed by local residents who must periodically fulfill unpaid community political positions, such as president, secretary and treasurer (discussed further in Part Two). If a person is selected by the community for such a position, he is obligated as a member of the community to comply, even if it means declining an available contract position for work in Canada. According to workers who have responded to community duties and rejected their available contract position in Canada, it is extremely difficult to reenter the program. Possibly the refusal is misunderstood by employers or officials who do not understand this rural political structure. Thus, a worker completing civic duties at home and unable to work in Canada for a season may have his name permanently dropped from the worker list due to the abundance of available labor in Mexico.

The Program in Theory and Reality

Aside from the above observations and opportunities for improvement, this study has noted a few discrepancies between what actually occurs at employment sites and what is stated in the contract.

Health Issues

Although most workers do not experience health problems while in Canada, a few do experience conditions or situations that require medical attention. Although each worker has thirty-four cents per day deducted from his paycheck to pay for Canadian Health Insurance, interviews with workers and employers indicated that some situations go unreported or untreated. One greenhouse employer related,

I had one Mexican worker who kept saying he didn’t feel well, his stomach was bothering him. So we gave him some Malox. I think he just didn’t want to work. He was young and probably homesick, so his stomach-ache was in his head. My wife and I are so busy with this place that we didn’t have time to take him in to be checked out. But he was fine. Nothing was really wrong.

In this case, a language barrier was part of the problem, and the worker was unable to adequately explain his feelings and symptoms and had no easy access to a translator. He felt he had no recourse yet did not want to complain too much for fear of not being asked back. As it was, the employer gave him only an average recommendation and did not request him by name the following year.
One tobacco farmer reported that having Mexican workers was easy, saying, "I've never had problems with the Mexicans. Once one had poison ivy and so I took him in for a shot." In another incident, a worker fell off a tractor, "My side hurt for weeks. I thought I broke some ribs. My boss told me to take a day in bed. So I worked again, even though I hurt. I didn't want to cause problems because I need to come back next year. I have five children at home." On the other hand, when a worker cut and twisted his arm while harvesting tobacco, his employer took him to a doctor to be treated and still requested him the next year.

Among themselves, workers are sure that it is best to refrain from mentioning problems or complaining to the employer, because one risks future job positions. One worker commented, "patrones use you, then forget you because they can always get more Mexicans." Case studies illustrate that health issues are not always reported or taken seriously and that employers arbitrarily control this aspect of laborers' lives in Canada. Workers lack confidence in the program's overall system of choosing, evaluating and retaining workers.

**Hours and Overtime**

As indicated in the contract, workers are guaranteed forty hours of work per week. However, under urgent conditions an employer may ask his laborers to work extra hours. Some of the workers told stories of work weeks of over sixty hours, although not minding the long days because of the money they were earning. Although phrased in the contract as an option, most workers believe that this is not really a choice. They feel they must continue to work until the truck is loaded or the crop harvested, otherwise they will be labeled as uncooperative and once again gamble with next year's position.

**Day Off**

Similarly, according to the contract, workers are allowed one day off per week. Yet in crucial times, such as during harvesting periods, employers may request that workers defer their free day until it can be made up at a later period. One tobacco worker said, "In two months we missed three days off. They were never made up. We worked right through, and then the day came for us to go to the airport and the days were lost. We got paid well, but we didn't get the rest."

**Trading Workers**

The contract states that workers are not supposed to be lent to other farmers unless specific paperwork is submitted and approved by FARMS and the workers' government representative. This is a safeguard for workers to have approved living and working conditions. However, interviews with workers and employers indicate that the loaning of workers does happen. In one interview, a farmer noted that he and other tobacco farmers "lend" and "borrow" Mexican employees without going through the bureaucracy, saying, "We just do it among ourselves."
Living Conditions

Living conditions are technically under the jurisdiction of the Canadian Health Department, yet as noted earlier not all of the workers’ quarters have been inspected. Thus living conditions can vary substantially from one farm to another. Although most farms offer clean, comfortable accommodations, there are some employers whose conditions are substandard. For the same fear of being considered a troublemaker and losing a possible position for the next year, workers are wary of complaining to their country representatives.

Job Experiences in Canada

Workers’ experiences in Canada differed, varying with the time away from home, the job performed, their employers and their own individual personalities. A few poor living and working conditions were reported, along with opinions that government representatives are unable or unwilling to give assistance. Some laborers charged that their government agents are interested in the economics of the program as a whole, or in their own jobs in Canada, to the point that the workers’ rights and humanity are set aside. One worker commented that, “the Mexican consulate can’t help us even if they wanted to, because they are at the mercy of the Canadian government and don’t want Mexicans to be replaced by people from other countries.” Other workers’ sentiments were that the Consulate has no sympathy for them and “is no different from the organization in Mexico City—corrupt.” It is important to note that the representatives and program officials from the sending country are in charge of protecting workers’ rights, and that there is no truly independent monitoring agency.

When Mexican workers arrive in Toronto, employers or employer representatives and the Mexican officials are there to meet them. They are given envelopes with the Mexican Consulate’s address, so that in the event of a problem they can contact their country’s representatives. According to the consul, they are encouraged to report any types of dissatisfaction, illnesses or injuries. Through this, workers theoretically have a way of reporting breaches of contract or unfair situations, although due to the structure of the program they effectively have none. Workers are “asked” back into the program each year based upon the favorable recommendation of the employer who may have his own view of what a “good” worker is. Workers feel that they are considered “good” if they never complain, do not point out problems, and can work the long hours accepting a near total lack of individual freedom.

This design of employers evaluating workers in order to lower turnover has its negative effects. Real or perceived injustices, ailments, or poor situations are not always reported by the workers for fear of losing their jobs in the future, and the employer holds complete power over the employee’s future in the program. More than two-thirds of the seventy-eight interviews done in Mexico and Ontario with current or past migrants to Canada indicated that the workers would
not be likely to complain of poor conditions.

As everywhere, at times there are conflicts between employers and workers. One farmer said, "I had this one guy in here who wanted to be the mouthpiece for the whole group. He tried to organize them. So I got rid of him and he never worked in Canada again." Although what really happened in this incident is not clear, housing conditions at this particular farm were poor, and no official had ever checked the workers' living and working conditions.

In 1991 an anonymous Caribbean worker in the program wrote to a local paper, *The Tillsonberg Independent*, voicing sentiments that workers lack basic rights, are worried that if they complain they will be removed from the program, and believe that the liaison officials are interested in the economic contract and not the laborers themselves. This theme is continually repeated; that workers are caught between efforts to reduce job turnover and the freedom to notify officials and seek assistance in improper situations.

Another issue is that most employers are not aware of the cultural differences between themselves and foreign workers and may misinterpret body language. For instance, Mexican workers, especially the indigenous ones, are often quiet and out of respect refrain from making eye contact with their employer or those they consider to be of higher status. One employer related that he could "tell a bad worker from the start, by the way he stands and looks down or sideways. Like he's talking back to you in his head." Although my interviews indicate that such situations are not common, they could be reduced through an increased understanding between the different cultures involved.

**Working in Canada versus Working in the United States**

Mexicans working in Canada through the Caribbean Commonwealth and Mexican Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program face different sociocultural situations than Mexicans working in the United States. In my 78 interviews, over 85% had also worked either documented or undocumented in the United States. Although their reactions to life in Canada depended greatly upon their varying experiences in both countries, some generalities are worth mentioning.

Foreign workers in Canada are clearly a supplemental labor force with their daily lives geared solely towards horticultural goals. Social opportunities during free time in Canada are minimal as compared to entertainment and social events in the United States. In Ontario, when work is slack, workers play soccer on the farms, rest, or ride their bicycles to town and play pool or go shopping. Employers are usually strict about drinking and encounters with women, although one employer occasionally took his workers to town for beers on Saturday nights.

Another employer said, "Our Mexican workers can use the community center. They could go swimming. But they don't. I don't know why. Even when they have free time they just stay home on the farm." In general, the foreign workers related that they feel inhibited in Canada, especially as compared to the United States. The workers laughed that, "When we go out people
stare at us. Maybe they think we're going to do something strange because we're different."

Most of the Mexican workers in Canada said that while there, they did nothing but work. "That is what we are here for. We work every day except on Saturdays when we have time to go to the grocery store and clean up where we live and rest for half a day. Then we work some more." For many individuals the complete dependence and paternalism of the program is an acceptable tradeoff for the job and wage security.

Most towns in rural Canada do not have any type of Hispanic community as compared to rural communities in Texas, California and throughout the United States. There are no Spanish-speaking clubs, churches, bars, concerts or other primarily Spanish-language cultural events. As one laborer from Oaxaca said, "We walk around towns in California and we fit in. There is no way we can, you know, be so comfortable here." Thus for Mexicans in Canada, aside from each other, there is no type of network or cultural support. They are isolated in communities that see them as temporary agricultural laborers and little else. One workers explained, "Many patrones here aren't interested in us. Just do the work. Don't talk to me. They don't like to explain things to us or hear our ideas."

Three-fourths of those who had worked in both the United States and Canada felt more racism in Canada than in the United States. One veteran of work in both countries said, "In the U.S. you have all kinds of people. Some think they are better than Mexicans. But in Canada everyone thinks they are better than us."

FARMS does point out that some communities have developed more than merely working relationships with their offshore workers; in Grey County the Caribbean workers hold a concert of their music for the residents, and in Simcoe the Army & Navy Club holds dances for the workers. In Niagara the Catholic church holds mass in Spanish and the Anglican church stores bicycles for foreign laborers when they return home.

On an individuals basis, the relationships between workers and their patrons vary widely from one farm to another and even one community to another. Although this paper has documented some negative examples, there are numerous cases of workers and employers establishing friendships lasting for years. One man and his father, the only two foreign workers employed in a family-run greenhouse enterprise, became close friends with the employer and his family. In the evenings the Mexicans taught the Canadian children Spanish, and everyone would eat and watch television together. In general, according to the workers, the majority of most worker-employer relationships are fair, though physically strenuous, and occasionally even enjoyable.

Policy Recommendations

1. This study illustrates a need for cultural translation, information and understanding among workers, employers, and officials. Employers and job operations would benefit from more cultural background information on their foreign employees' lives at home.
2. FARMS and the sending country's government officials should more closely monitor variables for being an employer and inspect all living and working conditions prior to the acceptance of an employer into the program, in the event that the laborers decline to report poor situations.

3. Better controls and observation by Canadian and Mexican officials are needed to verify that regulations specified in the contract are adhered to by employers.

4. Workers need a means to notify their government officials and FARMS of problems and rate their employment situations, but without fear that their honest answers will jeopardize future jobs. Currently, the program is an organized, if paternalistic, labor migration system whereby all basic worker needs are met. It relies heavily on the power of the employer to evaluate a worker, theoretically reducing yearly turnover and seeking quality, repeat workers. Inherent in this scheme is a severe loss of power coupled with a willingness by the workers to suppress certain rights and work hard, not complain, not question and not organize.

5. Recruitment policies in Mexico City need to be regularized and freed from corruption. Changes at this level will be slow to come, in as much as they are embedded within the entire Mexican bureaucratic system. Although unable to dictate a country's recruitment policies, FARMS' suggestions of efficient, just hiring practices, and perhaps a higher visibility in Mexico, if allowed, could be a positive step.
Part Two: View From the Community

This section of the report analyzes the impact of contract labor migration to Canada on a labor exporting community in Mexico. Data was gathered in an indigenous Mixtec-speaking community in rural Oaxaca in Southern Mexico. All 410 nuclear households in the community have been affected by one or more migration flows: cyclical or permanent to the United States, seasonal to Canada, or temporary or permanent to Mexico City. The statistical realm used here of sixty-one household interviews does not include the families or single individuals who have completely resettled elsewhere in Mexico or the U.S. Each year several single young men and women leave the community and become firmly entrenched in life in the United States or Mexico City. Occasionally, entire families also leave the community to search for jobs. The single individuals who relocate to Mexico City or the United States periodically return to visit the sending community. When entire nuclear families move, trips home are rare.

Deciding Where to Migrate

A major question in the study of community migration patterns is how people decide where to migrate. Here, as in most rural Mexican communities, people are faced with three main migratory choices, earning low wages in Mexico City, working in the United States (frequently without documentation or job guarantees and with high living expenses) or if available, seasonal and secure jobs in Canada. The decision of where to migrate involves a myriad of variables such as money available for travel, gender, position in the life cycle, contacts in other regions, attachment to a nuclear family in the home community, and individual personality.

Mexico City

Mexico City is the destination chosen by families who need extra income but wish to migrate and stay together. Families find security in the established networks of people from the community who moved to Mexico City in the 1960's and 1970's. Although wages in Mexico City are lower than in any international destination, its close proximity and lack of linguistic barriers makes it a more attractive destination for some people than foreign countries. With families to help out during initial transition periods and provide room and housing, and with minimum transportation costs as compared to working in the Untied States, Mexico City is an affordable migration destination for anyone in the community.

Once in Mexico City, both men and women usually find jobs which permit them little free time to return to the home community except for a few days around the community's annual fiesta. A common trend for those who have relocated to Mexico City, known as the eradicados, is to sell land holdings to relatives still in the community, and keep the house for visiting during
From Oaxaca to Ontario:

the fiesta. Thus, ongoing participation in the home community's government, most agricultural commitment and the maintenance and manifestation of many social ties is almost impossible. The use of the indigenous language is also replaced by Spanish as the primary language within one or two generations. This will be discussed in further detail below.

The eradicados have a loosely organized group in Mexico City that meets throughout the year to sponsor dances or other events and help finance projects such as a community social pavilion in the home town. Thus some social cohesion and even community development based on allegiance to the home village is maintained for the first and occasionally second generations of migrants to Mexico City.

United States

The United States is the most common destination for many first-time male migrants, who due to their youth and single status are ineligible for jobs in the Canadian contract program. The stories and the material goods of older migrants visiting home from the U.S., combined with the lure of comparatively high-paying jobs, make it a more popular destination than Mexico City. Migration to the United States follows a variety of patterns, such as seasonal male migrant labor, permanent relocation of the men, or permanent relocation of the entire nuclear family. The majority of the households surveyed had at least one member who had worked either documented or undocumented in the U.S. According to their interviews, most were unable to save enough money on their seasonal labor to remit home over $200 per month. With enough money saved, or borrowed at high monthly interest rates, theoretically anyone can go to the United States to search for jobs. Many young men, often as young as fifteen years of age, begin this cycle of migration under the guidance of a father, uncle or older brother. Some return annually, while others stay in the U.S. for years before returning to Mexico. Increased vigilance at the U.S. border has kept many men in the U.S. for longer periods of time rather than returning home annually. Another 150 individuals from the town are known to be living permanently scattered throughout the United States, with extremely infrequent visits home. Although mainly the men migrate while still single or by leaving their families at home, in the last eight years a few women and even young children have also made the journey to the United States with their husbands, brothers or fathers. None of the women who have left the community for the United States have yet returned home.

Individual personalities and personal situations play a role in the decision of where to migrate. Several former contract laborers to Canada said that they opted to return to the United States instead of Canada because of their need for individual freedom. They could not accept the purely work-oriented lifestyle found in Canada and the strict rules where a worker unsatisfied with his situation is unable to leave and search for another job. This contrasts greatly to migrants' lives in the U.S., which offer more individual freedom and choice. In Canada, even in limited free time, workers' activities are often restricted by scarce transportation from farms to town centers,
usually provided once a week by the employer. One man who left Canada to work in the U.S. said,

In the United States I am free. I can visit friends, go to the 7-11 and get a burrito, hang out on Sunday playing basketball in the park with other Mexicans. We don't have any of this in Canada. We were not people with families and ideas while in Canada, we were laborers and nothing else. We worked without joking around much. I had some great ideas for the patron, but he didn't want to hear them. I think sometimes our bosses think we are stupid since we don't always understand each other.

For some personalities, the instability of employment and lower savings of the U.S. are a tradeoff for independence of movement and lifestyle.

Personal situations also affect migration destination decisions. One young man, recently pressured by the community to marry a woman with whom he was seen after a village dance said, "I don't want to go to Canada. It's no fun there. For me, in my case, the United States would be the place to go and stay for a long time." This contrasts to his happily-married brother-in-law who is eager to build an addition to his house while waiting for a second child, who said, "Going to the U.S. is a mess. Going to Canada is hard too because you are gone from the family for a long time, but I will make the money there to build here and buy things for our house."

A common effect visible in all migration to the United States is that ties to the community are weakened as the goals of individuals or families change while they live in the United States. The focus of personal and family life and the investment of money ceases to be aimed solely at the sending Mexican community, and is instead divided between lives, entertainment and goals in both Mexico and the U.S.

**Canada**

A job in Canada is usually the favored migration choice by men who have families and have never become established in the United States. After working in the U.S. for a few years, many young men who have not geared their lives exclusively towards a future in the United States return home and marry women from their communities, expecting to support their families through a life of cyclical migration. Migration to Canada is the most desirable type of migration during the middle and family years of the life cycle. In spite of the negative aspects mentioned in Part One, the large salaries and job security of contract labor in Canada appeal to family-oriented men interested in continuing life in the home town. The Canadian contract program has strict acceptance requirements and limited space, furthermore requiring knowledge of the complex application process for the program. At times, workers who wish to continue working in Canada are not requested back by employers, or lose their position in the program while fulfilling community requirements, and must turn to other labor destinations. Geronimo, who
began to work in the United States after not being asked back to Ontario said,

I would rather work in Canada, but one season I turned down the position so that I could be secretary for a year. Now my place has been taken and they aren't giving me another chance, even though my recommendation was good. I couldn't explain it all to my boss, so I wasn't asked back. Now I work in California but I don't bring home as much money.

Migrants formerly enrolled in the Canadian contract program find the low-paying jobs within Mexico undesirable and usually inadequate to support their families, and choose instead to work in the United States.

Various Destinations and Change at Home

Breaking down the research community into the impact of migration on the household, women, economics, agriculture, education, religion, and political structure, is a beneficial, though artificial tool for understanding the different impact of various migration streams on specific aspects of the people's lives. Migration is embedded within the entire life of the community, and no one sector of life can be isolated and understood without its surrounding cultural characteristics and structures.

Women and Migration

Heavy cyclical migration has been a part of the research community for over thirty years, with the effects of migration on women permeating all parts of life. Most women living there now, except the younger ones, say that they do not want to work or live anywhere else even though their husbands are frequently gone. Other women have already left, returning only for brief visits, following one of three trends; studying elsewhere then finding a good job, working in Mexico City as a domestic servant, or leaving to live with relatives in Mexico City after having problems in the village. Elena, a young single woman home for a short visit to her parents, said,

Life here is too hard for women. They have no rights, no freedom. They must do what their husbands want, wash clothes and take care of the children, and always watch out for the chisme (gossip). It isn't for me. I respect my mother and father but cannot live as they did.

At sixteen, her parents sent her to school to learn to be a secretary which led to a steady and well-paying job. With it, she provides for both herself and her parents.

Because of the high out-migration of males in the community, there would be a high
proportion of women in the community were it not for their migration to Mexico City. Many unmarried daughters, fifteen or sixteen years old, go to Mexico City to work as domestic servants sending money home to their parents. Usually these women marry men outside of the community and ties to the rural home are quickly lost.

Mexico City also functions as a solution for both unwed, older women faced with few local financial opportunities or chances of marriage, and for single mothers who likewise feel financial pressures plus the added burdens of community disapproval and gossip. For these women, Mexico City is both affordable and supportive in terms of extended family assistance through relatives and friends who migrated there years ago. Unlike women in the home community who are excluded from community meetings, committees and leadership roles, women are involved in the group of eradicados and frequently hold official positions.

Migration of women to the United States is still rare in this town, although in the past few years three young women have traveled with their husbands to the United States where they live today. They have no plans to return permanently to Mexico, although they would like to visit every few years.

In this community, only one woman has worked in the contract labor program to Canada, even though according to the Mexican consulate in Toronto jobs are available to all women who pass the requirements. This woman had no children and her husband had left six years earlier for the United States and never returned. Her father had worked in the program, and helped her negotiate the bureaucracy, resulting in her job in a packaging plant in Ontario for three two-month seasons. Back at home she bought agricultural fields, which she loans to others in return for part of the harvest. She also purchased a piece of land in town and built her own three-room cinder-block house. Although she enjoyed the job, and was ambivalent about her employer, she said three seasons were enough and now she remains in the community running her family’s store. In general, women are not able to work contract labor in Canada due to family and agricultural responsibilities in the absence of their migrating husbands.

The only businesses run by women in the community are found in households where the husband works or has worked in Canada, such as the local poultry butchery, community telephone, and several small general stores. These small businesses now generate their own incomes and help support the families apart from the migrant remittances.

Households

Migration to Mexico City most frequently involves the relocation of the entire family, or single women or men who are preparing to migrate internationally. Migration to Mexico City has less to do with cyclical migration than with permanent out-migration. This contrasts to migration to Canada and the United States, which is generally circular as the men search for jobs internationally while women and children remain in the community waiting for the remittances and the return of the migrants.
One primary difference is the relative insecurity of the families dependent on migrants to the United States, when compared to families with the head of the household in Canada. A family waiting for a migrant to return from the United States is never sure where he is, if he has found a job, if he is healthy, if he can save enough to send remittances home, or if he has a girlfriend or another family in the north. Our data indicate that well over 40% of men living and working in the United States have a girlfriend or second family and do not want to have their Mexican community as their only or primary home. Many families in the Mixtec sending community are not sure when, or even if, the migrant will ever return home.

Family abandonment, or near abandonment, by migrants to the United States is not uncommon. Many households speak of a family member in the United States who will be coming home “this year for the fiesta.” On further questioning, the missing person has not returned in over five years and remittances stopped completely years ago. In this survey of sixty-one households, at least five women had not seen their husbands, now living in the United States, for over five years.

These insecurities, especially economic, affect household decisions, now made by the women who tend to be conservative in their practices, not making major changes in purchases, construction or agriculture. Although families attempt to continue their social networks, without disposable income this can be a hardship. Families resign themselves to waiting for news and the husband’s return, children grow up with absent fathers, and the boys and now some of the girls, wait for the day when they too can go north.

A sharp contrast is seen in families dependent on migrants to Canada, who receive remittances regularly and know to the day when their spouses will return. Social ties are continued by the women during their husbands’ absences, because they have their husbands’ income to fully carry on social obligations.

The comments of the women in this sample of households provide an excellent indication of why so many families, and 90% of the women, prefer that the heads of households go to Canada.

- “There they don’t drink and get in trouble with the police.”
- “They make more money than in Mexico [City] or the North [United States].”
- “My husband sends money home. When he was in the U.S. he forgot to send money and forgot about this town.”
- “We know he will come home each year by September, or at least by the Day of the Dead.”
- “In Canada he doesn’t have girlfriends or other babies.”
- “To go to Canada he doesn’t have to suffer the dangers and expense of crossing the border to the U.S.”
- “His work is guaranteed and even if the crop fails he will get some money.”
- “My children need their father. When he goes to Canada I know he will be back. When he went to the U.S. I never knew where he was, what he was doing, if he had a job, if he was sick or hurt, or ever coming home.”
The issues mentioned above, of family preservation, financial security and safety, are at the core of the popularity of labor migration to Canada. Although the male head of household may be gone from between two and eight months, he is still a dependable financial and even social presence in the household and community.

A few women wanted their husbands to work in the United States instead of Canada. Not surprisingly, these six young women wish for their husbands to take them along to the United States on the next trip. One twenty-year old woman with a four-month old baby said, "Alberto likes the U.S. better, and can go where he wants looking for the best job. He says he will take me one day."

In sum, migrants to Canada have less opportunity for financial and social distancing from their families and home communities as compared to migrants to the United States. Instead of dividing energies between new homes and old, migrants to Canada retain their own nuclear households and sending communities as the focus of their energies.

Economics

Traditionally, a major focus of return migration studies has been the economic impact of remittances. Many previous studies have emphasized the negative aspects of migration on the sending community, yet as recently noted, there are economic advantages at the local and national level (Durand, Parrado and Massey: 1996). In this study I sought to determine if migrants to different regions used remittances in distinct ways. However, families' reluctance to discuss specific earnings and expenditures led to analytical difficulties. In addition, many households are dependent on remittances from migrants involved in several migration flows rather than just one, and individual migrants are sometimes involved in more than one type of migration during a single year. It is common for young men to migrate to Mexico City and the United States within the same year. They may live with relatives and work in Mexico City for a few weeks or months, earning travel expenses and passing the time until spring. Thus it is difficult to correlate destinations with specific economic impact.

There is no question that the remittances sent from migrants in Canada are significantly higher than remittances from migrants to Mexico City or the United States. Average remittances from Canadian migrants were over $1000 per month, in comparison with a U.S. migrant who sends on average $200 a month. Migrant workers in the contract program have in the past earned as much as $14,570 in one working season, although the average is $1457 per month. Data on remittances from migrants to Mexico City is not available, but they are no doubt significantly lower. Furthermore, interviews suggest that money earned by migrants in Mexico City was consumed by living expenses and housing. Don Sabino, who has lived in Mexico City for fifteen years and visits his home community regularly, explained,
I bought some land near Mexico City. There wasn’t anything for me to spend money on back in the country. We have our little house there for when we go home for fiestas. But the family is here. The children finished school here, so I don’t need to take money back there.

Return migrants working in Canada and the United States initially used earnings for the construction in the community of *tabique* (cinder block) houses, considered better and of higher status than the traditional adobe. Likewise, after living in Mexico City for many years a few families built the modern homes, hoping against the odds that their children would return to the village for a safer lifestyle, a situation of which I found only three examples. Today, twenty years after the opening of the road to the community, only one or two families have not built houses of *tabique*, a point reinforced by the correlation between house materials and international migration. Migrant remittances were also initially used for investment purposes through the purchase of agricultural lands and/or vehicles. Today, the community has a total of about twenty-five trucks, most of which are used as cargo transport for the entire community. All but eight of the trucks belong to men who have worked in Canada.

In regards to the household economy, the main difference between Canadian and U.S. migration is that certain consumption and investment goals are met more quickly by migrants to Canada. The large earnings and rapid acquisition first of material goods, then investment goods (land, store, or truck purchases) at an earlier stage in the household cycle also makes it possible for families to have money available for children to continue education past the eighth grade, if desired. In other words, a level of disposable income is reached by the household while the children are still at an age to continue their educations, instead of families reaching this economic level after the children have grown up. After working in the U.S. and saving little, Don Hermelindo worked in Ontario for three seasons, then constructed a modest two-room brick house in the center of town. Soon afterwards he was able to send a son and a daughter to live and study in a nearby larger town, after which both found jobs, kept ties with the community although they do not reside there, and have never migrated internationally. By the same token, another son left the village at sixteen for the United States, and after three years has yet to return.

*Changes in Agriculture*

According to the Mexican consulate in Toronto, one of Mexico’s reasons for participating in the Canadian contract program is to give Mexicans a chance to transport technology and culture from Canada back to Mexico. As noted earlier, migrants to Canada work in a variety of agricultural jobs ranging from fruit orchards and tobacco fields to greenhouse vegetable cultivation, as well as the packing and processing of the harvests. Although there are many learning experiences, actual opportunities to apply new agricultural knowledge to Mexican communities are limited. Many of the Canadian technologies, such as greenhouse crop production, are beyond the financial means of the migrants. Furthermore, different geographical and climactic condi-
tions, such as mountainous and rocky land with little irrigation and distinct dry and rainy seasons, make it difficult to transfer practical technology of crop types and cultivation from Canada to Mexico.

In spite of these deterrents to the application of agricultural knowledge from Canada to Mexico, in this community significant correlations were found between migration to Canada and changes in agricultural practices after migration, and between migration to Canada and the construction of small-scale irrigation works. In the absence of a community wide irrigation system, some migrants to Canada have constructed household systems complete with concrete collection tanks for supplying water through plastic tubing to the fields in order to improve and extend the growing season. These irrigation systems are especially noteworthy due to the increased tomato, onion and other vegetable yields. Several of these families produced a surplus and sold vegetables within the community and in a nearby community, whereas normally produce is imported to the community from other regions of Mexico through a series of profit-making middlemen.

Other agricultural changes brought back from Canada include the planting of new crops or use of new agricultural techniques. Those who had worked in Canada had enough disposable income to try uncommon or non-local, non-traditional crops such as cabbage, cucumbers and strawberries, or to plant and prune fruit trees, or to purchase and utilize more appropriate fertilizers.

Aside from directly affecting community agricultural life upon return as seen above, the absence of men and their participation in the program has led to other changes in agricultural production. Migrants to Canada are usually able to prepare their lands in Mexico for planting before leaving the community. Depending on the land farmed, use of small-scale irrigation, the type of crop, the weather conditions that particular year, and the date of departure for Canada, migrants are often able to plant the staple crops of corn and beans before leaving. Their schedules also may allow them to help with some of the harvesting upon their return.

In cases where migrants have already left for Canada at planting time, their dependable remittances enable their wives or remaining family members to hire labor, frequently from a nearby non-migrating town, to assist with agricultural jobs such as planting, weeding, or harvesting. Tomás, who works in a greenhouse in Ontario, explained his household's agricultural organization.

Usually I am around to prepare the fields before I leave. Then my wife, daughters, and young son plant the milpa (corn, beans and squash crop) and when I come home I help harvest whatever hasn't already been done, like wheat. I send money and if they need help they hire a moso (day worker) for the hard-est work. But usually they like to save the money and do the work themselves. They don't have much else to do since the village is so quiet and the men are gone. Before, women like my grandmother didn't do as much in the fields.
They were making the food for the men and they would do some jobs, but the men did the heaviest work. Today the women can do almost anything in the fields.

As in family life, although physically absent during the main growing season, the men who migrate to Canada are still an integral part of the household's agricultural decision-making process. They decide how much of which crops to plant and when and how to fertilize, leaving explicit details for their families. The increased income gives them a broader margin of risk, thus some families experiment with new agricultural ideas and practices, as reflected here.

This is in stark contrast to families dependent on migrants to the United States, in which case the remaining family members, usually the wife, frequently make all of the agricultural decisions. In this scenario, the women tend to act conservatively, purchasing expensive chemicals sparingly and continuing practices started before their husbands left. Wives of migrants to the United States are frequently more physically stressed and handle all of the agricultural work themselves, without the option of hiring help, due to lack of disposable income. Senorina, weak from hepatitis and single-handedly raising two children since her husband's absence to the United States four years ago said, "If I don't plant and weed how will I feed these young ones? We have no money to pay a moso, so I work. My husband will come back to help, but I don't know when. Maybe by harvest this year, maybe not."

In summary, migrants to Canada are able to invest agriculturally in their home community, planning for future farming and economic activities in Mexico instead of being forced by lack of local opportunities to look towards Mexico City or the United States.

Education

Teachers at the local secondaria (junior high school) express concern that primarily young men are not continuing school even through the eighth grade. Peer pressure and the allure of the U.S. has made migration a rite-of-passage after which boys are viewed as men. One teacher commented,

They listen to the stories of life in the North and see the trucks and TV's and clothes. Look at my clothes, they are from here and my shoes are Mexican. Those who migrate look down upon us, the maestros (teachers), because we earn less money and have fewer things than they do. I will probably never have a truck. Those who migrate, even if they can barely read, don't respect us or what we want to teach their children. Here education has little value because it is so underpaid.

In the absence of local jobs young men are conditioned by their families and the community to migrate somewhere, at least part of the time, if they wish to reach their material and monetary goals. In the eyes of many in the community, continuing education is expensive, takes even more
people away from the village, is time-consuming and considered to rarely contribute to a better life.

As noted earlier, families with a surplus of disposable income, frequently ones dependent on migration to Canada, choose to send their children to boarding schools after the telesecundaria. Several young people who acquired jobs due to their advanced studies elsewhere remained in Mexico and never migrated to agricultural work in the United States or Canada. However, with the absence of local employment, the educated individuals must seek jobs in larger towns or cities, eventually contributing to weakened ties to the community for them and their children.

Religion

Other changes occur as labor migrants from Mexico convert from Catholicism to evangelical sects while working elsewhere. Case studies of men who have worked in the United States indicate links between migration and conversion to Protestant groups. Families and individuals migrating to the United States, (or other places within Mexico) have greater opportunities to experience non-Catholic religions than workers in Canada. Although a few migrants in Ontario commented that they attended a Catholic church with their employer, the majority said that they had no contact with missionaries or any kind of religious institution while there. “We are always working, so if we have time free we shop, clean up, watch TV and relax.”

In the community under study, as with many rural Mexican communities, Catholicism combined with prehispanic elements is tied to local traditions and reflected in ritual relationships between people. Godparents are chosen for significant life events such as baptism, confirmation, first communion, and marriage, creating a web of relationships made through Catholicism that binds the community together and acts as a support system during difficult times. Crisoforo, who feels he is not really any religion, just a “believer,” said,

When I came to the United States, the Church of Christ helped me. In Washington my friends said to go to there because they would give me clothes and help out until I got a job. They had services in Spanish so I went because they had been kind. I am Catholic at home, but now I sometimes go to the Pentecostal meetings. I still want to have my children baptized Catholic, but the Catholic church takes too much money.

In recent years approximately sixty individuals have converted to either Pentecostal or Jehovah’s Witness Protestant sects. Some tension has arisen as evangelicals cease to participate in the unifying, albeit costly, Catholic fiestas and activities. Aside from the religious dimension, the celebrations, sponsored each year by different individuals, involve feasts and entertainment open to the entire community. One man, now a Pentecostal, says he no longer has his old compadres in the community, just brothers in his belief, also noting that, “It’s not the Catholic church that helps in the U.S., it’s the other ones.”
The loss of residents due to migration during most of the year leaves few people to both sponsor and attend the celebrations. In this community, the only saints days still celebrated in elaborate detail are the ones that fall during the months when migrants are home, between November and early February. The saints whose days are between late spring and early fall are either no longer celebrated or are now of lesser importance as the community population is too low and consists mainly of women, children and the elderly, who frequently do not have the financial means to have elaborate festivities. While home for the fiesta, Armando, who works in Ontario, summed up the impact of migration on his religious life,

I am here from November until April. In January there isn’t so much work to do here so I help my compadres with their daughters’ weddings and meals celebrating first communions. All the weddings are in December and January. Next year I will be one of the diputados, [assistants] for our main saint’s day. We will have three bands on different nights and for a week we will bring in bulls for a rodeo, have skits, dancing and food. If I worked in the United States I couldn’t pay my part, or I might not even be able to come home.

Migrants to United States do not have assurances of when they can return or how much disposable income they will have saved from their low paid and often sporadic jobs. Thus many migrants to the U.S. do not commit to sponsor the largest religious celebrations. Likewise, migrants to Mexico City have little extra income, which combined with their usually inflexible jobs, means only a superficial participation in the Catholic community’s celebrations. Recently, most of the time-consuming and most prestigious fiestas have been coordinated and paid for by migrants to Canada, or occasionally by a handful of the most successful eradicados in Mexico City.

Community Political Structure

As in many rural Mexican towns, the political structure is based on unpaid positions, or cargos, such as president, secretary, and police. Participation in these jobs is a duty that each male citizen must fulfill in spite of the financial hardships due to loss of remittances from jobs or a season of migration. Women are generally excluded from community leadership roles and committees. Political positions are filled by men chosen by the community who are obligated to accept the job at the expense of other paying jobs, and live on saved income or on loans with high monthly interest rates. Major positions are for year-long terms and are so time consuming that many individuals are unable to plant their normal amounts of corn, wheat or vegetables, relying further on cash saved or on the sale of lands or animals. For the less important jobs, such as police, migrants to the United States and Canada may hire someone or have a son or older, non-migrating relative fill the position. Other minor positions are often only needed during the dry, winter months when the village is full of returned migrants and when the weather allows work on community projects such as the construction of a drainage system.
Until recently, this system caused a rift between the inhabitants of the village and the *eradicados* in Mexico. Short of men to fulfill the local *cargos*, the community assigned major positions to individuals living in Mexico City, who because of jobs and children in school, were unable to accept the obligations. This problem prompted discussion of who was to be considered a real part of the community. The incident led to years of avoidance of any community participation or financial contributions by the *eradicados* until 1994, when it was agreed that donations and fund-raisers in Mexico City were an acceptable substitution to continue being considered a part of the community. Women do participate in leadership roles among the *eradicados* in Mexico City.

Migrants to the United States are frequently absent during the election process which normally takes place in late October, when many of the Canadian migrants have returned home. Migrants to the United States are frequently not considered for positions in as much as there are no guarantees that the individual will return home by January 1 to assume the role. Furthermore, migrants with obligations, jobs, and plans in the U.S. avoid commitments in the sending community that would restrict their returns north. Frequently they do not have the savings required to accept a community position while maintaining one or possibly two families.

Migrants to Canada, on the other hand, have the wealth needed to support their household in the sending community while they hold a cargo position. Their secure return dates enable them to accept minor positions that can be vacant during the months that they work in Canada. Yet, as mentioned in Part One, if migrants to Canada are chosen for major cargos at home, due to lack of communication and understanding with Canadian employers and program officials, they face the possibility of losing their places in the contract program.

**Community Development and Migration**

Look over there, we are building a community center. And last year we repainted the church. Those pipes stacked by the old jail wall are for our sewage system...All of this because of the men who work in Canada.
— Don Arnulfo, 1994 Town President

This statement illustrates the firm belief by many inhabitants within the community that the development they seek (which is usually described in material terms) is due to contract labor in Canada. Families short of men, yet with financial resources because of migration to Canada, are able to hire outside workers to complete *tequio*, community labor and service obligations. The community's relative prosperity also enables town officials to request sizable donations from local families for the town's projects. Households with men in the United States have significantly smaller remittances, long-absent migrants, a more difficult time completing *tequio* and often vocally oppose these requests for community development money. Thus the families
with members working contract labor in Canada supply a core of wealth and hired labor for community development projects.

**Indigenous Linguistic and Cultural Traditions and Canadian Contract Labor**

Throughout Mexico, indigenous languages are quickly disappearing. Today an estimated 350,000 people in Mexico speak Mixtec, with approximately 50,000 Mixtec speakers residing in the United States on a permanent or cyclical basis (Kearney and Runsten: 1994). In this community, although the majority continue to speak Mixtec, many of the younger people can only understand, and not speak their parents' indigenous language.

While the community is reaching for material development, the preservation of its indigenous language and cultural traditions is generally not seen as an important issue. Most feel that modernization, including loss of indigenous heritage, will bring the community closer to beneficial development and advantages for everyone. Centuries of discrimination against indigenous populations in Mexico have led to frequent rejection of traditional ways. Don Daniel commented that, “even when we go to towns close to our village, we don’t speak Mixtec. People will think we are stupid and try to cheat us.” Seasonal labor migration to other regions reinforces such attitudes, such as when a few young men were stricken with embarrassment when greeted in their native tongue while working in Oregon. “We don’t speak that here. Speak in Spanish…Here we are Mexican, not Mixtec.”

The native language, along with many other cultural traits, can best continue in the absence of migration, which shows no indication of slowing. Although this study offers no direct statistical evidence for correlations between labor migration destinations and the continuing use of an indigenous language, case studies clearly illustrate that families remaining in the home community are more likely to use and transmit the indigenous language. The women who remain in the home community while their husbands work in Canada or the United States pass on a core of linguistic and cultural traits to their children in the setting of traditional households and networks. This contrasts to entire families that relocate to Mexico City or the United States, in which case native language speaking ability is lost within one or two generations.

**International Network Formation and Unofficial Jobs in Canada**

Undocumented migration to Canada is practically nonexistent as compared to similar migration to the United States. In this sample of sixty-one households, seven heads-of-households had worked unofficially in Canada. Either they did not qualify for the contract program due to their young age, or they were ex-participants who, for one reason or another, were no longer enrolled in the program. By using networks of family members participating in the program, or their contacts with previous employers, the seven individuals spent approximately five
weeks working in rural Ontario after traveling through and working in the United States.

Their Canadian employers provided them with good housing and the minimum wage in cash. Yet unlike the participants in the official program, these workers were not guaranteed salaries equal to Canadians in the same jobs, had no medical coverage, no employment insurance, no pension plan, and no transportation provided to and from Mexico. When no longer needed for agricultural work, all seven briefly returned to the United States and then to their Mexican community. They each carried with them, or mailed home, several thousand dollars in remittances. Their savings were significantly less than those officially enrolled in the program due to costly travel expenses, purchases, and entertainment and living expenses while traveling between Canada and Mexico via the United States.

The workers gave several reasons for not wishing to remain in Canada, echoing comments from Part One of this report. First, in the small, rural Ontario towns where they worked there were no Mexican communities where they could easily be assimilated, set up homes, and find permanent jobs. Second, several said that they had strong aversions to the long, cold Canadian winters. Third, all of these migrants were men who had families in Mexico and wanted to return home as soon as possible.

An interesting question is whether or not the current Canadian contract program could possibly contribute to large-scale networks and undocumented migration to Canada, much as the U.S. Bracero Program provided routes and networks for continued Mexican migration even after its termination. However, different geographical locations, temporal and social settings and job opportunities all make it impossible to draw distinct parallels between current and former international Mexican contract labor. Data from this study suggest that the lack of social and cultural support and agricultural jobs in the winter, combined with the dependence of workers on employers for housing, makes it practically impossible for individuals, much less families, to permanently relocate to Canada. However, the contract program and need for labor in rural regions does provide unofficial seasonal workers with opportunities and avenues of knowledge resulting in a few agricultural jobs during the warm months.

Conclusions

This two-part report has taken a look at the Canadian contract labor program between Canada and labor providing countries, and the effects of the program in an indigenous community in Oaxaca, Mexico. As shown here, small-scale contract labor migration from Mexico and other sending countries is a viable solution to agricultural labor shortages in Ontario. Although there are strengths and weaknesses in the program, it generally appears to be successful not only for the Canadian employers and economy in general, but for the Mexican migrants, their families and home communities.

This study suggests the following trends and indicates that more in-depth studies of agri-
cultural and other changes in the home community after migration to Canada versus the United States and Mexico City are needed.

1. Families involved in a migrant stream to Mexico City are frequently among the first to lose meaningful ties with the community as compared with those migrating cyclically to the U.S. or Canada. Brief journeys home for fiestas by Mexico City eradicados cannot alone be considered a continuation of community tradition.

2. Families of migrants to Canada and the United States, and the migrants themselves, who stay in the sending community continue linguistic and cultural traditions and social networks. They are the core of cultural continuity.

3. Significantly larger remittances by migrants to Canada make goals (usually material consumption) accessible in a shorter amount of time, leaving financial resources available for investment in small businesses or children's educations earlier in the households' cycles.

4. These larger remittances also give households dependent on Canadian migration a chance to take agricultural risks through the application of new crops or technologies such as small-scale irrigation construction.

5. Families with migrants in Canada have the emotional and financial security that the head of the household will return with significant savings, a stability not seen in families dependent on migrants to the United States.

6. Labor migrants to Canada have the financial resources to sponsor ritual relationships and the costly community fiestas during the winter months.

7. Labor migrants to Canada are not influenced by the missionary activity often aimed at migrants to the United States, ensuring their continued participation in their community's unifying Catholic traditions.

8. The sending community is able to include and count on migrants to Canada to fulfill, or pay someone to fulfill, political obligations and leadership responsibilities.

9. Migration to Canada, unlike migration to the United States and Mexico City, allows families to invest not only in their households in the sending community, but also in the home community itself. Migrants continue to focus on the sending community, not locations elsewhere, for their future and the future of their descendants.
Appendix A

Revenue Canada Withholding Requirements

Income tax, Canada Pension Plan contributions (C.P.P.), and Employment Insurance premiums (E.I.)

The following chart shows the approximate deductions required at various income levels for both single and married workers. The chart applies to income earned in Canada by Mexican seasonal agricultural workers. However, it could also apply to Canadian residents employed in agricultural or other industries. Figures were initially provided in increments of $2000 Canadian Dollars, then converted to U.S. Dollars at the 1995 exchange rate of 1:0.7285.

This chart represents simply an approximation of the deductions required at various income levels. Several assumptions are built into the calculations such as income from other sources, the province of employment, the residency status of the worker, the level of income of the dependent spouse (if applicable), as well as available deductions and non-refundable tax credits.

The tax amounts shown below are aggregates of federal and provincial income taxes.

The chart is not meant in any way to replace Revenue Canada’s guidelines to Canadian employers regarding their withholding requirements. It is for information purposes only.

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From Oaxaca to Ontario:
References


