

MIGRATION AND
INEQUALITIES IN
THE FACE OF COVID-19:

ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT IN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

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PREAMBLE

 Our world changed drastically on February 11th 2020 when the World Health Organization announced the name of the new coronavirus disease as COVID-19, and the pandemic was later considered the greatest challenge we have faced since World War II. Although we have started to experience social life in various new ways, the impacts that it will bring are still unknown. In recent years, migration had already undergone different transformations globally, and more changes are expected. How will populations on the move and migrant populations live in the following years post-COVID, and how different actors will respond to these changes, is yet to be seen.

The Seminar Migration, Inequality and Public Policies at El Colegio de México has worked over the last three years on better understanding the different dimensions of inequality associated to migration, and how public policy mediates these processes. Facing this new context, we decided to generate an academic discussion, albeit accessible to the general public, to apprise how COVID-19 will impact different dimensions of migration processes, and reflect on what would be needed to address these effects. In order to ponder these questions, we brought together the perspectives of a series of binational experts from the academia, the public, social and private sectors, who deliver, on the one hand, a discussion about the economic, political and social context, and on the other, considerations on specific vulnerable mobile populations, as well as of support networks, and implications for policy aimed at diminishing the negative effects of the pandemic. We hope that these two issues of our series *Notes on Migration and Inequalities* will constitute a frame of reference to inform about the current situation and generate proposals that will transcend this contingency.

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El Colegio de México

Old Challenges, Institutional Vacuums, and New Challenges in Managing Migration Flows to Mexico

Silvia E. Giorguli | El Colegio de México

There have been recurring news stories about the situation of international migrants around the world in the news coverage of the pandemic. These are not the ones that attract most attention precisely because one of the effects of this health contingency has been the tendency to turn towards the local, find the closest and most urgent needs and set global problems aside. Nevertheless, showcasing the situation international migrants face in the pandemic will allow us to see discrimination (in a moment in which the traveler, the migrant, the foreigner is seen as a potential source of spread), overcrowding, and the poor sanitary conditions of migrants and their families in migration stations or centers, and the problems they face in order to access health services –both because their work situation doesn't give them access to benefits and possibly because their undocumented status prevents or inhibits them from seeking medical assistance. At the same time, we have seen several news stories about the role of international migrants in areas such as caregiving (for the elderly, for example) in contexts like the European one, or their importance in agriculture and in the food processing industry in the United States. In the face of their recurrent vulnerability, which has increased, the essential quality of their silent presence also stands in contrast.

This is not a distant or alien problem to the Mexican context. In fact, there are adversities related to the pandemic in each of the dimensions of Mexico as a country of origin, of arrival, of return, of transit or of refuge, as well as having to do with the policies followed by the region's countries vis-à-vis the pandemic. At the time of writing, the news story about the first death of a Mexican national in a U.S. managed detention center appeared. Likewise, we were surprised at the beginning of the health contingency by the news of violent acts in migration stations on the southern border, or by images of vulnerability in places where Central American immigrants await

the opportunity to cross “north,” whether because their asylum claim was accepted or because they found another way to cross.

From the Mexican perspective, what we are observing is the result of the vacuums, inefficiencies, and unresolved problems in migration management, mainly in our country, but also in the United States. The health contingency exacerbated them; it reveals vulnerabilities more starkly. It also puts forth the Mexican incapacity to define a migration management strategy suitable with the principles we have subscribed to through several international agreements.

It is difficult to anticipate migration scenarios. At the same time, the challenges to manage migration seem too big. Nevertheless, there are aspects for which we can define concrete actions, pondering the ways in which the health contingency has shown and increased international migrants' vulnerabilities. Below, I selectively depict three examples linked to different types of human mobility in Mexico.

1. Return migration and access to health

The economic recession in the United States from only ten years ago, combined with the current restrictive migration policy, generated an important amount of returning Mexicans, the largest one in decades. Mexico was not ready, and we observed problems derived from lack of clear procedures and bureaucratic obstacles that hindered migrants' access to education and health services, work, housing, and banking.¹ The economic contingency expected after the emergency –accompanied by the anti-immigrant climate favored by Trump's government- anticipates another important number of Mexican returnees to the country. This return will take place during a period of transition in the Mexican health system. The Seguro Popular insurance, which returning migrants could access for 90 days, stopped operating and it is unclear

how migrants can access the recently created National Health and Wellness Institute (INSABI, acronym in Spanish). We know a group of Mexicans returning to the country will require special services for their chronic degenerative diseases². It is crucial to have a clear health access structure that anticipates the challenges and needs of the population in the face of a recurring wave of respiratory illnesses associated with COVID-19.

2. Migrant children and adolescents

One of the peculiarities of last decade's migration flows is the presence of underage population.³ This is observed both in returning migrants as well as in migrants in transit in Mexico, and among asylum seekers here or in the U.S.A. Migrant children and adolescents travel accompanied by family members and sometimes alone. There is a legal loophole in these cases that limits the possibility of protecting migrant children, from the moment of their detention through the management of procedures related to them – whether for deportation or asylum. Concrete actions are required to protect the best interest of the child by generating safe and adequate spaces while their migratory situation is being determined, and that allows families to stay together. Likewise, adequate attention is needed regarding migrant children's health needs –including considering preventive actions like vaccination.

3. Waiting time and life conditions during the processing of migration documents in Mexico and the United States

The crisis has displayed the precarious life conditions of migrants in transit through Mexico and the vulnerability they face, especially during health contingencies like the current one. There are no adequate spaces in migration stations; in many cases, they are overcrowded and overpopulated. In the case of migrants awaiting a resolution to their asylum claim to the United States, they are often temporarily located in irregular settlements in border cities. Concrete measures are needed to reduce bureaucratic paperwork and waiting times, both in Mexico and the United States.⁴ Likewise, actions could be taken in order to foster better living conditions in temporary settlements following examples and protocols from other countries.

There is no doubt that the challenges Mexico faces in terms of migration management are huge and are linked both to the country's policies as well as to deficiencies and vacuums in the U.S. migration system. Creative solutions which can effectively break the accumulated inertias in migration management are required. Perhaps one could begin deconstructing the several problems and anticipate them as much as possible in the different scenarios once the contingency is over.

NOTES

- 1 S. Giorguli and A. Bautista, (in press), *Derechos fragmentados: Acceso a derechos sociales y migración de retorno a México*, (México: El Colegio de México).
- 2 N. Castañeda-Camey, X. Castañeda, V. Díaz, C. Ruiz and Alonzo O. (in press). "Salud y derechos de los migrantes mexicanos retornados: barreras, acciones y oportunidades," in *Derechos fragmentados: Acceso a derechos sociales y migración de retorno a México* eds. S. Giorguli and A. Bautista (México: El Colegio de México).
- 3 In the case of children coming from the United States to Mexico, see Zúñiga and Giorguli (2019) and Masferrer *et al.* (2019). V. Zúñiga V. & S. Giorguli, *Niñas y niños en la migración de Estados Unidos a México la generación 0.5*. (México: El Colegio de México, 2019). C. Masferrer, E. Hamilton and N. Denier, "Immigrants in Their Parental Homeland: Half a Million U.S.-born Minors Settle Throughout Mexico," *Demography*, 56 1453-1461, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-019-00788-0>.
- 4 Coria and Zamudio (2018) present a detailed analysis of Mexico's legal framework and the challenges we face. E. Coria and P. Zamudio, "Inmigrantes y refugiados ¿Mi casa es tu casa?," *Documentos de Política Migratoria*, (México: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, 2018). <https://migdep.colmex.mx/publicaciones/DPM-03.pdf>. For the United States, Meissner *et al.* (2018), define the system as "broken," inoperative and not effective. D. Meissner, F. Hipsman, T.A. Aleinikoff, (2018). "The U.S. Asylum System in Crisis: Charting a Way Forward," (Washington D.C.: Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

The Pandemic and Migration Policies on the Mexico-United States Border

Andrew Selee | Migration Policy Institute

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed changes on mobility at a global level, from the closing of borders, flight prohibitions and visa restrictions and access to asylum. With the purpose of limiting movement and promoting social distancing to prevent the spread, many of these measures make sense. But there are reasons to believe that in some cases, including some decisions by the U.S. government, these measures might become more permanent or give way to other efforts to restrict migration that President Trump's administration has wanted for a very long time. While it is still difficult to distinguish between what's necessary due to the crisis and what could become permanent because of other political reasons, using the crisis as an excuse, it's worth starting to draw the spheres in which we are seeing changes that could last much longer than the epidemiological situation would suggest.

One of the strongest measures was the partial closure of the border to non-essential traffic. This was agreed by the U.S. and Mexican governments, as well as by the U.S. and Canadian governments for their shared border, and it has a very understandable logic to try and reduce traffic that is not for work, education or medical purposes. The difficulty about this measure lies in the fact that much of the work transit happens outside of official margins, so many Mexican workers who live on the Mexican side work informally on the U.S. side doing housework, landscaping, agriculture and in other sectors where informality prevails. These workers, who cannot prove they have a job on the other side of the border, are currently unemployed and will depend on the future opening of mobility in the border. It's likely that this will happen when both countries start to limit their social distancing measures, since it's a well thought measure, negotiated and implemented within the parameters of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the U.S. government's unilateral measure of returning undocumented migrants

and asylum seekers to Mexico, implemented for health reasons, might last longer than the current crisis. Instead of following regular detention procedures, the U.S. government announced that it would use a little known health authority to return undocumented migrants and asylum seekers and Central Americans directly to Mexico, without registering them as detainees or taking them to a detention center. The Mexican government accepted this measure (supposedly, under a lot of pressure), but refused to receive nationals from countries that were not from Central America and Mexico. Now, the U.S. government returns undocumented migrants in less than two hours, an express process, and has no asylum facilities.

This measure can also be understood in the midst of a pandemic. The risk of having thousands of migrants in detention centers was significant, and even though the risk is still latent on the Mexican side, with returnees, it's better than a restricted space. But it is also likely that the U.S. administration might have attained a goal for the longer term which had nothing to do with the pandemic, which is to eliminate access to the asylum system in the border and to stop almost all irregular crossings. I suspect that while COVID-19 lasts, this measure will be in force in the border, even though other measures that restrict mobility within the country and in the border will be suspended. To some of the U.S. President's advisors, the pandemic gave them what they yearned for: a way to seal the border to illegal crossings and eliminate the asylum process there.

The third measure, and another one that could stay beyond the crisis, is the decision to pause during two months the emission of permanent visas -green cards- to beneficiaries that are outside the country and who are being claimed by relatives. It is a reduced number, with a few exceptions, and probably does not go beyond 52,000 affected people per month. In the short term, the number of affected people is even less, since

consulates have been closed and unable to process visas. Nevertheless, there are many possibilities that this measure is renewed beyond the contemplated two months, therefore limiting new legal entries to the country.

Since the majority of Mexicans that are going to live in the United States these days do so legally, precisely through these permanent visas, it's very likely that this will have a bigger effect on Mexican families living in the United States and their families in Mexico, who are waiting to be reunited with them north of the border. However, the measure left out those who have been claimed by their employers and temporary workers, which suggests that the Trump administration sees those who are going to the United States to work in a very different way than those who are entering for family reunification.

These are not the only migration measures that have been taken in times of COVID-19, but they are probably the three with the most impact

on the Mexico-U.S. border and migration between the two countries. While it is probable that the measure that limits traffic along the border is cancelled at some point, when the circumstances allow, there are reasons to believe that the other two measures, one with irregular crossings and one with resident visas, might last much longer.

It should not surprise us that the leaders of many countries will use the current crisis to justify measures in other areas of public policy that were already on their agendas. These will not be the only migration and other measures implemented for emergency reasons, but they will find a certain higher permanence even when the crisis has decreased. Crises give government executives ample margin to act in favor of the common good, but some of the measures turn out to be less temporary than others. In this case, some of the U.S. government's temporary migration measures will probably have longer lives than the official reasons behind them.

Employment and Migration in Mexico in Times of COVID-19

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One of the main effects produced by the expansion of coronavirus in Mexico has been the decrease in economic activity and consequently, the decrease in employment. Adding to the pandemic's effect is the negative performance that both the country's economy and employment had already been experiencing. In January this year, before the first COVID-19 case came up, the International Labour Organization (ILO) had already estimated an increase in unemployment in 2020 and 2021. Furthermore, economic activity in Mexico decreased -0.1 in 2019, which means there was already a decrease before the pandemic.

Since the spread of the virus in Mexico, social distancing measures have been implemented in order to minimize it. On March 23rd, the Mexican government suspended classes, forbade gatherings with more than 100 people and suspended economic activities involving social mobility. The main motivation to implement these measures is that the health system can maintain its capacity to care for the sick needing hospital treatment, therefore containing the mortality rate.

In comparison with previous recessions in Mexico, this crisis will have a relatively bigger impact in employment. As a consequence of suspending work, many companies have been forced to stop operating due to a substantial fall in the demand of their products or due to isolation, while others have been reorganizing to be able to work from home, as much as possible.

Isolation means a lower demand for labor and, most likely, the substitution of work by robots and digital apps, a situation in which low skilled labor is the most affected. On the other hand, the higher skilled labor is more complementary with technology; it is more susceptible to do be done at a distance, may have better isolation measures, and workers with these skills may have better conditions to work from home. Therefore, in Mexico, lower skilled work is the most affected one due to social distancing.

Regarding women's employment, the fact that their work is more complementary with technology could affect them relatively less. Nevertheless, it has been found that, with social distancing, women have been absorbing a higher workload of domestic work, such as caring for children who aren't going to school. This relatively larger workload could lead to a fall in women's productivity that offsets the positive effect of higher complementarity with technology.

On the other hand, the effect of social distancing at work will be very different depending on the economic sector: while tourism, the entertainment industry, as well as aviation will be severely affected in the short term, other sectors like medical services, food manufacturing and telecommunications will be favored due to the health crisis.

For more than 15 million Mexicans in the informal sector (Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo, fourth trimester, 2019), staying at home and following the social distancing measures recommended by the government will mean not generating an income that allows them to survive day by day. Many have to decide between being exposed to the virus or being hungry. It is very likely that this sector will be much more exposed to the effects of the virus and will also suffer a decrease in their income due to the economic crisis generated by distancing measures. The effects of the crisis will be disproportionately higher in this economic sector.

Another challenge that the Mexican economy will face will be the return of Mexicans from the United States, who will be affected by unemployment in that country, especially because the health crisis affects sectors in which migrants are traditionally employed, such as construction, restaurants and hotels. In out-migration areas, the return of people not only means pressure on the local job market, but it also poses an epidemiological challenge due to risk of infection, in places with scarce medical services. In addition, there is a decline in remittances due to returnees,

as well as the income decrease of migrants in the United States.

Job loss in Mexico could also lead to many Mexicans considering migration towards the United States as the only way to recover an income for their families, despite the pandemic exacerbating xenophobic reactions in the United States and the tougher border controls. This could have the effect of stimulating irregular migration towards the north.

On the other hand, the effects of the pandemic will also generate strong pressure over the already weak Central American economies and their labor markets and thus, over migration. It is very likely that migration flows towards Mexico

increase, posing a challenge for our country to handle them without impairing migrants' human rights and controlling the pandemic, in an environment that fosters the intensification of anti-immigrant reactions.

The pandemic has taught us that there are no limits to its spread and that the wellbeing of a sector of the population depends on the wellbeing of others. Now more than ever it is necessary to implement strategies that, while avoiding the stigmatization of the most vulnerable population, help maintain a minimum level of wellbeing through well-designed economic and social policies that include, among other things, unconditional transfers to those most in need.

Migration, Inequality and COVID-19: Implications for Mexican Immigrants in the United States*

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While people all around the world have been hard hit by the economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants are especially vulnerable. This note explores the initial economic impact of the pandemic on Mexican immigrants in the United States, with a particular focus on Texas, and discusses the key immigration-related challenges posed for policy makers and researchers going forward.

Mexican immigrants in more vulnerable industries

A large share of Mexican immigrants worked in sectors that have largely shut down in the wake of the pandemic, most notably restaurants. Prior to the crisis, over 10 percent of employed Mexican immigrants were working at restaurants; in Texas, the share was slightly smaller at about 9 percent.¹ Mexican immigrants are also over-represented in construction, and many building projects have been put on hold or scrapped as a result of the pandemic. Most of these workers have either been furloughed or seen their hours drastically cut. Some Mexican immigrants work in essential sectors that have not been adversely affected and remain employed, such as those working in landscaping or agriculture. On the whole, however, social distancing mandates have proven very harmful to Hispanic immigrants. In fact, fewer than one in eight Mexican-born workers in Texas has a job that can easily be done from home.²

The COVID-19 pandemic and resultant economic downturn is likely to worsen the economic status of many Mexican immigrants and exacerbate income inequality. Low-wage workers are

disproportionately concentrated in sectors that have been more affected by shutdown orders and a collapse in demand. Families headed by a Mexican immigrant were more likely to be poor even before COVID-19. And, as discussed next, the fact that many Mexican immigrant families are not eligible for the temporary expansions to the safety net means those families will become even worse off than other families.

Relief in sight?

The U.S. safety net is intended to help families who face an unexpected setback, including losing a job. The unemployment insurance system provides payments to qualified workers who lose a job or see their hours cut through no fault of their own. Workers must be “covered” by the system, however; unauthorized immigrants and people working “off the books” are not covered. About 43 percent of the 11.3 million Mexican immigrants are unauthorized (4.9 million), while the rest either hold green cards (3.5 million) or are naturalized U.S. citizens (2.3 million).³ Less than 5 percent have DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) status.

The federal government expanded unemployment insurance coverage in mid-March 2020 to include many self-employed workers (and added a supplemental benefit of \$600 per week for four months), but it did not include unauthorized immigrants. Only legal workers—typically U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents—can receive unemployment insurance benefits. States decide whether to include recipients of DACA and other similar legal statuses in the unemployment insurance program; Texas has done so.⁴

* The views expressed here are solely those of the authors and do not reflect those of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas or the Federal Reserve System.

The other major federal relief program created in response to COVID-19—one-time cash payments of up to \$1200 per eligible adult and \$500 per child—also excludes unauthorized immigrants. Further, U.S. citizens, legal immigrants and DACA recipients who file their federal income taxes jointly with a spouse who uses an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) are not eligible for the payments. ITINs are often associated with undocumented immigrants since people who use an ITIN typically do so because they have no Social Security number.

While federal funds are not available to unauthorized immigrants, states can opt to fund relief measures at their own expense. California has been the only state thus far to announce a relief fund for unauthorized immigrants. Texas seems unlikely to create such a program even though it is second only to California in its estimated number of unauthorized immigrants (some 1.6 million, including 1.1 million from Mexico).⁵

There are valid reasons for excluding unauthorized immigrants from many governmental transfer programs. After all, governments do not want to undermine the rule of law or potentially incentivize unauthorized immigration. The extreme nature of the current situation with a pandemic and widespread mandated business closures may weaken such concerns about incentive effects; extending some benefits to unauthorized immigrants right now is unlikely to create expectations of similar benefits in more normal times. Nonetheless, giving benefits to unauthorized immigrants is a tough sell politically, and perhaps more so when many voters are facing difficult financial situations.

Hiring immigrants in the recovery

The current situation has interesting but conflicting implications for the eventual economic recovery. A major economic rationale for limiting access to transfer programs and keeping benefit

levels relatively low is to incentivize work. The current unprecedented supplement to unemployment benefits (\$600 extra per week for 4 months) effectively removes the incentive to work for laid-off low-wage workers. Who then will be willing to fill the jobs at grocery stores, warehouses, delivery services and the like created by rapidly expanding demand in those sectors or at restaurants when they reopen? Perhaps immigrants who are unfamiliar with the unemployment insurance system or ineligible for benefits, some of them unauthorized. However, many of the jobs being created right now are at large corporate chains that use the E-Verify system to check their hires' employment eligibility. Whether such businesses continue to use the E-Verify system will be interesting to see.

Agenda for policy makers and researchers

Addressing the public health threat posed by COVID-19 is clearly the top priority for policy makers. Reducing the economic fallout from the business shutdowns is also critical. But even with these priorities and record federal spending to help households and businesses, some groups have been strategically left out.

The economic vulnerability of Mexican immigrants in particular and the exclusion of many of them from expanded safety net programs will result in more poverty and income inequality. For researchers, this is an opportunity to examine how ineligible immigrants fare and shed light on the social costs of crises among this group. It is also an opportunity to study how immigrants with legal residence and U.S. natives respond to relief programs compared with workers who are not eligible for them. For example, will immigrants who are ineligible for jobless benefits be the first to return to work? And if not, is that because they are thwarted by programs such as E-Verify? The results of that research may affect policy making as the pandemic continues and once the recovery gets underway.

NOTES

- 1 Authors' calculations based on March 2019 through February 2020 Current Population Survey data.
- 2 Authors' calculations based on O*NET data applied to 2013–2017 American Community Survey data; see <https://www.dallasfed.org/research/economics/2020/0407> for the U.S. and Texas more generally.
- 3 See <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states>.
- 4 See <https://www.nelp.org/publication/immigrant-workers-eligibility-unemployment-insurance/> and <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/1/21197017/immigrants-coronavirus-stimulus-relief-bill>.
- 5 See <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/TX>.

Thoughts about some of the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Remittances at a World Level

Mario Hernández | Western Union

Along with seemingly every other business in the world, Western Union has spent the last few months considering the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on our operations, and, more importantly, on the millions of customers all over the world who depend on us for rapid, efficient transfer of money.

Unlike most other businesses, however, Western Union has a unique perspective due to our long history of serving distressed communities in times of crisis; our worldwide reputation has been built, in large part, on bringing people together when conditions are at their worst and people need their loved ones the most. Our history of serving such needs, as well as our global reach and combination of a digital and retail business, leaves us well positioned to spot a few signs pointing the way forward as global migrants, our customers and our business embrace a New Normal:

- People will still send money, and digital acceptance is only accelerating
- People sending money online expect a high level of service, which encourages trust
- Cash and retail locations will still be needed in many parts of the world
- The COVID-19 crisis may serve as a new call for true financial inclusion

Western Union's remittance business was, of course, impacted by COVID-19, with money sends falling in some areas. It is still too soon, however, to clearly distinguish between business falloff due to people sending less money vs. due to the large-scale lockdowns that kept them from visiting our retail Agents. At the end of April, the World Bank forecast a 20 percent decline in remittances in 2020; while we feel that number is pessimistic, we are expecting remittance volumes to fall. As stay-in-place guidelines loosen and businesses around the world reopen, it will be

easier to gauge whether people have less money to send home and how much.

We do know that people still have a strong desire to send money during hard times. During the 2008 global financial crisis, for example, we witnessed the resilience of our remittance-based business as our customers remained highly motivated to support families and loved ones.

COVID-19 has made one overarching trend for the remittance business clear, however: Digital transactions, particularly on the send side, are the future. Western Union has spent years building out a digital infrastructure to match our global brick-and-mortar network, leaving us well-prepared for the surge in digital transactions we experienced as people looked for trusted, safer and more convenient ways to send money.

Combine the rise in digital sends with our expansion of receive options—money into a bank account or mobile wallet in more than 100 countries; near-real-time payout in 50 countries; and our longstanding cash payout at retail locations—and it's easy to see that for customers in many corridors, all-digital transactions are likely to become the status quo. The rise in the number of digital send, digital-payout, and all-digital (on both ends) transactions portends, we feel, a larger change in remittance behavior that we think is good news for remitting migrants around the world—with some important caveats.

First, while Western Union has long anticipated and fostered growth in digital transactions, we nevertheless were caught somewhat by surprise as so many longtime retail customers tried to use our digital services for the first time. The level of support they required quickly overwhelmed our customer-service networks and we fielded complaints via social media and other means about wait times and know-your-customer requirements. Already-worried people were frustrated as they tried to find ways to send money to their loved ones far away.

Western Union responded quickly to these issues, implementing a ‘Digital Location’ program that put a real person in touch with senders or receivers in 10 countries who needed help; we also beefed up our customer-care staffs with employees from other parts of the company, and implemented an automated system to help guide some customers through identification and other requirements to send and receive money. Finally, we updated our Agent Locator system three times a day to account for constant changes in open retail Agent locations and hours of operation.

This experience—though obviously made more severe by the pressing send-and-receive needs presented by the pandemic—made clear something we and many other businesses already knew: moving customers from a retail-based experience to a digital one is not as easy as pointing them to a website or asking them to download an app. When people’s health or well-being may depend on the fast, reliable receipt of money from their loved ones far away, stress, and expectations, rise. Particularly when it comes to serving less-digitally savvy populations, handling their money in a way that leaves them feeling respected and reassured requires more ‘touch’ than other kinds of transactions. Native language support is particularly important.

The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced something we already knew: For all digital’s explosive growth, and the promises of safety, convenience and economy it brings for millions, in much of

the world there is simply no replacement for local, brick-and-mortar Agents offering cash payouts.

As commonplace as virtual wallets and bank-account payout have become—even in less-developed parts of the world—they still require access to digital and financial services. As a company that holds financial inclusion and connecting the financially underserved to the global economy as core values, Western Union is as committed to serving a receiving customer in ‘off the grid’ rural Central America as we are to serving the corresponding sender, who may have online access and a bank account, in the US. This is why we continue to offer cash payout at more than 550,000 retail locations all around the world, rather than only serving an easier-to-reach digital market in the most affluent countries.

Unequal access to technology and financial services continue to hobble participation in the global economy for millions around the world; the COVID-19 crisis is just the latest, if an especially distressing, example. Western Union is proud to serve customers from all geographies and walks of life, but we know better than most that the benefits of the digital global economy still fall unevenly. One hopeful view of the still-unfolding COVID-19 crisis is that it may serve as an impetus for businesses, governments and NGOs to redouble their efforts to address this inequity and make real financial inclusion a reality for everyone, regardless of where they live—so that when the next crisis hits, help will be easier to send.

Mexican Human Rights Organizations Respond to Protect Migrants during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Gretchen Kuhner | Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración

As migrant rights organizations in Mexico analyzed the news of the coronavirus approaching at the beginning of March, it was difficult to imagine what social distancing and “sheltering in” would look like for migrants. In the U.S., organizations were focused on supporting immigrants as essential workers in service and agricultural jobs on the frontlines. However, in Mexico, the challenge would be to provide basic protection to migrants in transit, in detention centers, those stuck along the southern and northern borders, and those waiting for resolutions to their asylum claims throughout the country. Organizations were unsure how the U.S. and Mexico would react. Would the U.S. continue to deport Mexicans during a pandemic, risking their health? Would officials continue to place asylum seekers in the Remain in Mexico Program and return them to Mexico to await their hearings? Would Mexico put health concerns over U.S. political pressure?

By mid-March, two weeks before Mexico declared a national health emergency, several of the more than 200 shelters and organizations had developed protocols to guide service provision and emergency aid throughout the pending shutdown. Many of the shelters decided to close their doors to new arrivals in order to protect the current population. They also lost hundreds of volunteers who returned home, creating staffing shortages. Larger shelters set up quarantine sections in order to receive new migrants, including many that would be released later from the 65 detention centers in Mexico. Legal services and community-based organizations closed their doors and set up online consultations.

Advocacy was a different story. Approximately 40 organizations and networks constructed a multi-pronged advocacy strategy based on international recommendations urging states to release migrants from detention and to include all people, irrespective of their nationality or immigration status, in public health responses. Organizations

sent letters, signed petitions, published editorials, and appeared in local, national and international media.¹ They initiated litigation to demand the release of migrant detainees and sent recommendations for alternatives to detention to authorities in the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as international organizations.

By the third week in March, the policies of the U.S. and Mexico had become clear. On March 20th, the U.S.-Mexico border was closed to non-essential travel and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued an order establishing that all people crossing without proper documentation at, or between, ports of entry would be expelled to Mexico expeditiously or deported to their countries of origin without due process.² On March 22nd, the Mexican Foreign Ministry agreed to accept all Mexicans as well as up to 100 nationals per day from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.³ The order was implemented immediately and in the following days organizations documented as the Mexican government bussed Central Americans to the states of Tabasco and Chiapas at the southern border and left them stranded along highways to self-deport.⁴ At the same time, instead of releasing migrants from detention with immigration status and social assistance, the Mexican Foreign Ministry pressured Central American governments to accept deportations. Between March 20th and April 26th, the National Immigration Institute (INM) deported more than 3,600 migrants, leaving 106 in migration detention.⁵ Shelters with quarantine capacity received approximately 700 detainees with pending asylum cases through financial support from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

During April, organizations continued to address emerging humanitarian needs and to monitor and document the impact of COVID-19-related policies in Mexico. Food and sanitation

supplies were distributed to migrants in shelters and those holed up in rooms, apartments or homeless. When migrants in five detention centers protested lack of sanitary conditions, leading to the death of a Guatemalan asylum seeker, organizations filed complaints with the prosecutor's office and the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH).⁶ Along the northern border, shelters struggled to receive expelled migrants as well as Mexican deportees, some of whom were deported with COVID-19 after becoming infected in detention centers in the U.S. More than 20,000 people under the Remain in Mexico program had their asylum hearings postponed until at least June, leaving them in limbo in the middle of a pandemic, with organized crime devising new ways to exploit them.⁷ In the meantime, pending asylum claims increased by 33%, with over 65,000 people now waiting for adjudications that have been suspended by the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) until further notice.⁸

The week of April 12th, the litigation began to have an impact when judges issued two injunctions ordering the INM to implement public health protocols in detention centers and to release all vulnerable migrants including children,

the elderly, pregnant women and people with underlying health conditions. One of the injunctions issued by a federal judge in Mexico City, ordered the INM to cease detention of vulnerable groups during the remainder of the pandemic, to issue humanitarian visas and to provide healthcare services.⁹

The immediate emergency measures combined with the longer-term documentation and litigation have undoubtedly saved many lives and placed migrant rights organizations in a position to demand accountability for the migration policies implemented by the Interior and Foreign Ministries throughout the pandemic in Mexico. In the longer term, organizations will continue to monitor the effects of the reactive migration policies enacted by the U.S. and Mexican governments and the impact of the pandemic on migrants in general. The economic crisis in the U.S. may lead to massive returns to Mexico as it did between 2008-2010, while a decrease in remittances is expected to motivate further migration from Central America. Migrant rights organizations have confirmed in the last two months that the U.S. will use any pretext to close the border, even in violation of its own asylum laws and at the expense of human lives, and Mexico will continue to cower at the first provocation.

NOTES

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Lessons from the Pandemic: Poverty and Social Rights in Mexico

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Poverty and vulnerability are intimately linked to the pandemic that devastated the world in 2020. Initially, the pandemic was brought to Mexico by high class travelers and tourists. Nevertheless, it mostly killed poor Mexicans who can't pay for private health services, keep a safe distance at home or abstain from social interaction given their type of work, who have faced decades of bad nutrition that provoked a high rate of chronic diseases. Our society must exit the pandemic with a much more robust notion of solidarity. This new solidarity must pass the test that Ferrajoli calls, "the law of the weakest."¹ It should strengthen the most vulnerable.

Starting in 1930, Mexico built a system of programs and social services that mitigated inequalities. It strengthened and tended towards universality² in most essential services. The poorest people had access to education, health, and other services, albeit lagging. In the liberal era that has governed us since 1986, the balance is mixed. Among the positive elements, resources for health and public education increased and a network of programs geared towards the poorest and most vulnerable was created. Among the negative elements, the justice system became almost completely inoperative and a great deal of basic urban services were privatized, and their prices raised.

The system to provide these services, and to put in place actions and programs exists, albeit imperfect. There is a law that specifically underscores the Mexican pact for social rights and therefore, signals the course the system should follow. I am referring to the General Law of Social Development of 2004. This is a law of consensus and sums: its overall framework was created by the Democratic Revolution Party, but all parties contributed to it, and it was unanimously approved. That law is an example of political success. By capturing rights; laying the groundwork for its independent study and measuring their implementation; defining the elements of its

evaluation system; and allowing the creation of a counsel in charge of measuring and evaluating social development, this law gave Mexico what it needed to make progress in prioritizing the rights of the weakest.

From the passing of the law until 2020, the framework of the law, the counsel created by it,³ and the joint work by the public sector and independent academics, allowed Mexico to progress in certain clear ways, but also to detect weaknesses that must be addressed. The pandemic must generate a reform informed by the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL, Spanish acronym) studies and measurements oriented towards reconstructing and strengthening basic services. In addition, a limited number of programs, designed with a life cycle viewpoint, could notably boost life conditions and opportunities for the poorest. The programs only make sense if fundamental services –in this essay I am proposing them to be health, education, order and justice⁴– come close to guaranteeing access to these rights.

The first grand action is healthcare. During the thirties of the 20th century, after a decade of efforts to consolidate a universal public health system, the creation of the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS) and other parallel systems segmented health services. The existence of segmentation is not necessarily destructive. But it is fundamental to have a quality health service for those with the least means. The INSABI (Health for Wellbeing Institute, the present day universal health care system) does not fulfill that objective. Its inoperability during the pandemic has been evident. It also lacks the design elements needed for a segmented system to work. The Seguro Popular (program with similar objectives of past regimes) had deficiencies:⁵ there was no accountability for resources that should have been for state level health ministries and, in some cases, the public bids were corrupt; but its design is much better than INSABI, as well as its results. It is necessary

to refinance and rebuild the system. In order to do that, there are international regulations that cover from the basic medical consultation protocols, through the transparent accreditation of clinics, and the definition of the amount of beds and medical staff required per population size.

The Mexican government's inaction in the deterioration of public health and health services is unacceptable. Blaming the population for its co-morbidity during the pandemic makes the State evade its responsibility over health. Rescuing health service capacities is essential, as well as people having healthy behaviors. The latter is achieved with education (which includes early nutrition, clean water in schools and real physical education), with salaries, which has advanced greatly in the past four years, and with an effective regulation of nutrition systems. The Mexican population's terrible health condition (diabetes II, high blood pressure and obesity) is not a final curse. It is our social construct and it can be overcome.

The second action item is education. Mexican

education is very deficient. A wide group of specialists must redesign the system, which should emphasize self-health care and must really be functional in a context where distance learning will become a permanent part of the system.

The third action item consists of the interaction of property, order and justice. The poor people's living conditions can be explained in part by their lack of access to these three rights. Their lack of property isn't only due to lack of resources, but also to the bureaucratic labyrinths they face. The perverse combination of lack of access to property and to justice, in a context of overcrowding and terrible living quarters, partly explain their susceptibility in the pandemic.

Once the mentioned social rights have been taken care of, and efficient systems safeguarded through working services are in place, economic and social gaps can be taken care of through specific programs that prevent the law of the strongest from being prevalent in Mexico, and that, instead, substantially reduce inequality.

NOTES

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- 2 Universality was never achieved.
- 3 Mexico's National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy
- 4 The General Law of Social Development was negotiated and approved in 2004, after a long period of decreasing incidents of violence in Mexico. I consider that that's why property, order and justice are not mentioned. Violence and crime started to rise in 2007. If that law were to be updated, my proposal would be that these rights be included as social rights. Mexico's poor are much poorer and more vulnerable because their access to these rights does not exist.
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Pandemic as Pretext: How the Trump Administration is Using a Public Health Crisis to End the Right to Asylum

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The characterization of immigrants and refugees as “diseased” has a long history in the United States. In 1917, U.S. immigration authorities began a decades-long regime of “disinfecting” Mexican workers entering at land borders, using toxic substances. In the early 20th century, working class immigrants from Asia and Eastern & Southern Europe were strictly inspected for “loathsome or dangerous” diseases, while first-class passengers were not.¹ In the 1990s, Haitians fleeing a murderous regime were suspected of carrying HIV/AIDs and diverted to a camp in Guantanamo, Cuba. Those who qualified for asylum were only allowed into the U.S. when a federal court ordered release from their off-shore “AIDS prison.”² Now the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a pretext for the Trump Administration to implement some of its most extreme measures against people fleeing repression and violence – whose rights to non-refoulement are protected by U.S. law and international human rights.

Since 2017, the Trump Administration has enacted increasingly draconian measures to deter, block, or restrict access by asylum seekers and refugees. The quota of refugees lawfully admitted from overseas was drastically cut. A travel ban was enacted against any entrants from certain countries (mostly Muslim). Trump’s advisors implemented a “detention as deterrence” policy against asylum seekers who had no alternative to entering the U.S. clandestinely or making their pleas at a land-border crossing. Immigration authorities first stuffed migrant families into cages in freezing border stations and then filled detention centers with asylum seekers. The Administration cruelly separated migrant children from their parents, tried to overturn judicially-mandated protections for unaccompanied youth, limited (“metered”) claims accepted at border crossings, sent claimants back into Mexico to await decisions, and attempted by regulation to bar any claim for asylum from unauthorized

migrants who enter through the U.S.-Mexico border and had not applied for asylum in Mexico. While some of these initiatives have been halted or limited by U.S. courts, many of them are still in place.³

Mexico has been complicit with Trump’s initiatives. Under economic pressure, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador’s government blocks and depots asylum seekers traveling through Mexico. Mexico has also accepted the return to its territory of Central American asylum seekers who made claims at the U.S. border. Under the so-called “Migrant Protection Protocols” over 50,000 applicants were to wait for their U.S. hearings in Mexico in conditions which threaten their lives.⁴

Now the COVID-19 pandemic has given the Trump Administration a pretext to stop asylum claims at the U.S.-Mexico border and increase pressure on asylum applicants already in the interior of the U.S. The Trump Administration has suspended the hearings in the MPP cases, but will not allow MPP applicants to wait in the U.S. In U.S. cities with “stay at home” orders, other asylum applicants and their lawyers have been forced to show up for interviews and immigration court hearings, although non-essential functions in almost all other U.S. courts have been suspended. Attorney organizations and immigration court judges and staff have sued to protest this health risk.⁵ The multiple pressures to make asylum seekers give up their claims are particularly cruel violations of the fundamental right to non-refoulement under U.S. law and treaties ratified by the U.S. and Mexico.⁶

Immigration detention centers, including the more humane “shelters” for immigrant children, have become “hot spots” of COVID-19 infections, threatening the lives of both internees and staff.⁷ Advocates from the National Immigrant Justice Center, the American Civil Liberties Union, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, and other NGOs, supported by Democrats in Congress,

have been unable to get a blanket release policy for asylum seekers from the Department of Homeland Security. Lawyers have sought to free detainees from ICE custody through time-consuming individual or group *habeas corpus* lawsuits in federal court. Some actions have been successful while others have not. Increasingly judges are sympathetic to detainees' plight and have ordered release, including children protected by the long-standing *Flores* court order.⁸ On April 20, 2020, federal Judge Jesus Bernal issued a preliminary order on behalf of all ICE detainees that ICE begin reviewing the necessity for the detention of all detainees with COVID-19 risk factors and institute measures to protect all ICE detainees from infection by April 30, 2020.⁹ If the Trump Administration continues to oppose alternatives to detention (electronic monitoring or other forms of supervised release) for asylum seekers, history may judge that the Administration turned facilities detaining asylum seekers and other migrants into death camps.

In a further expansion of disease-based exclusions, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a new regulation which cited over-crowded detention conditions (that the Department of Homeland Security created) as the rationale for immediate expulsion. The order "suspend[s] the introduction of certain persons" arriving at the Mexican or Canadian border, who likely would be placed in "congregate settings" where they would be "held in close proximity." The order targets those who arrive by land, without valid travel documents. Instead of detaining them and allowing them the opportunity mandated in immigration law to express a "credible fear" of persecution, Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents are directed to interrogate encountered

persons in the field, to bypass normal immigration processing (which would entail detention), and expel them as rapidly as possible to "the country from which they came or their home country." The CDC order and an accompanying leaked CBP memo do not allow any consideration of claims for political asylum and make an exception only for a person who manages to make "an affirmative, spontaneous, and reasonably believable claim that they will be tortured..." Execution of the order by CBP will violate U.S. law and international treaties including the Refugee Protocol and the Convention Against Torture.¹⁰

There are ways to protect public health in the U.S. without a complete exclusion of asylum seekers. Applicants could be interviewed under safe-distancing conditions or by remote means, tested for COVID-19 and quarantined under humanitarian conditions if necessary. Healthy asylum seekers could be released under bond or with electronic monitoring, pending resolution of their cases. One of the worst ironies of stigmatizing Central American asylum seekers as disease bearers is that Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras did not have the coronavirus until it was imported from the United States through deportations.¹¹

It is the Trump Administration's detention and deterrence policies that created a public health crisis among asylum seekers which the government now seeks to use as a pretext for barring desperate people. International human rights treaties allow for some restrictions of rights during a "state of emergency," but rights limitations should be strictly tailored to the emergency as necessary and effective. Certain rights, such as the right to be free from torture and the right to life are never to be restricted.¹²

NOTES

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Migration and Mobility in an Age of Pandemic

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International migration has been steadily increasing since the end of the Second World War. In 2019, approximately 272 million people resided outside of their country of birth for one year or more (barely 3.5 percent of the world's population).¹ Until the global pandemic of 2020, tens of millions of people crossed borders on a daily basis, which added up to roughly two billion border crossings per year. Human mobility was part of a broader trend of globalization, including trade in goods and services, investments and capital flows, greater ease of travel, and a veritable explosion of information. The COVID-19 pandemic puts all of these trends into question, as states move to close their borders and to stop migration in its tracks, posing the biggest challenge to the international 'liberal' order since the 1930s and the Second World War. Could the pandemic be *the straw that breaks the camel's back*, putting an end to roughly seventy years of globalization, and bringing down the international liberal order itself? The legal and institutional edifice of globalization was under stress even before the pandemic. Now, however, reactionary populist politicians, like Donald Trump, are moving even faster further to undermine the foundations of the global order.

Like trade and foreign investment, migration has been a defining feature of globalization, and until the pandemic of 2020 human mobility was taken for granted, especially in the wealthier (OECD) countries of the northern hemisphere. Migration and mobility were in many ways connected to trade and investment, yet they are profoundly different. *People are not shirts*, which is another way of saying that labor is not a pure commodity. Unlike goods and capital, individuals become actors on the international stage whether through peaceful transnational communities or violent terrorist and criminal networks. Migration and mobility can be a threat to the security of states, and during a time of pandemic, the movement of people can endanger public health.

This is especially true when foreign workers are concentrated in production-line work (like meatpacking in the United States) or confined in dormitories, in crowded conditions and closed quarters, as in Singapore and in the oil sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf.

Yet migration is vital for human and economic development, and it reduces global inequalities.² Essential industries like healthcare and food production rely heavily on immigrant labor, skilled and unskilled, while remittances remain a vital source of foreign exchange and investment in many developing countries. Immigrants bring much needed labor and human capital, new ideas and cultures, and in liberal democracies, they come with a basic package of (human and civil) rights that enables them to settle and become productive members of society. Conversely, they may return to their countries of origin where they can have a dramatic impact on economic and political development.³

Foreign workers (documented and undocumented) and refugees play a vital role in essential services in the fight against COVID-19, whether in health care, agriculture and food processing, transportation, delivery, freight, and cargo. Even Trump with his emphasis on nativist and beggar-thy-neighbor policies, chose to exempt seasonal and farm labor from his immigration ban, recognizing that US food supplies are dependent on continued access to foreign labor. Trump also invoked the Defense Production Act to order meatpacking plants to remain open despite high levels of infection among the largely immigrant workforce.

Not all migration is voluntary – in any given year, tens of millions of people move to escape political violence, hunger, and deprivation, becoming refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced persons. In 2019, the number of “persons of concern” to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was 70.8 million, including 26 million refugees, 3.5 million asylum seekers, and

41.3 million internally displaced people. Wars in the Middle East (especially Syria and Iraq), East and West Africa, and instability in South Asia (Afghanistan and Pakistan) and Central (Northern Triangle) and South America (Venezuela) continue to feed a growing population of forced migrants. Because it is so complex and multi-faceted, migration of all types poses a challenge for nation-states, for regions like the European Union and North America, and for the international community as a whole (Hollifield and Foley forthcoming).⁴ These populations are incredibly exposed, highly vulnerable to infection, and with little access to basic sanitation and health care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the hand of populist leaders, like Donald Trump, Matteo Salvini, and Victor Orban, who want to close their societies to migrants and refugees, ignoring the rule of law and international legal commitments under the refugee convention. The ‘defection’ of the United States in particular from multilateral organizations, like the WHO, will accelerate beggar-thy-neighbor policies, making international cooperation to combat the pandemic far more difficult, prolonging human suffering, and increasing global inequalities.

America First and the ‘End of Liberalism’

In the first three years of his administration, President Donald Trump made good on his campaign pledges. He issued executive orders banning immigrants and visitors from many Muslim-majority countries. He focused on border security, illegally reallocating funds from the defense budget to extend the border wall—a hugely symbolic move for his electoral base. He slashed the number of refugees allowed into the U.S and made every effort to stop asylum seeking along the southern border. As a deterrence, he authorized the separation of migrant families at the border, ripping small children from the arms of their parents, eventually striking a deal with Mexico to push back all asylum seekers at the border, without giving them a hearing—a flagrant violation of international law. The COVID-19 pandemic has allowed Trump to consolidate his nativist agenda, effectively sealing the southern border, while suspending refugee admissions as well as

legal immigration, the latter for a period of sixty days.⁵ US consulates worldwide stopped issuing visas on 20 March 2020.

Trump’s immigration and refugee policy is couched in ‘civilizational’ terms⁶, pitting Christians and Jews against Muslims and Mexicans/Hispanics against whites and blacks. With the economic implosion and soaring unemployment in the wake of the pandemic, Trump has vowed to close the US labor market to immigrants to ‘save American jobs.’ The pandemic has created a perfect storm of cultural, economic, and security threats in the U.S. At the domestic level, the nativist policy shift contributes to an environment of intolerance and intimidation in which hate crimes have increased,⁷ giving succor to violent, right-wing, extremist groups. At the international level, Trump’s beggar-thy-neighbor policies have alienated allies and stifled international cooperation.

Trump is making US foreign and security policy through naked appeals to nationalism, racism, and xenophobia, ignoring long-term national interests, and undermining multilateralism. Symbolic politics is the order of the day. While nationalism and scapegoating migrants and refugees appeal directly to Trump’s base and are a vital part of his 2020 reelection strategy, long-term foreign policy and security interests are sacrificed for the short-term electoral high that comes from nationalism, nativism and symbolic politics. The need for allies and international cooperation to combat COVID-19 and for practical solutions to refugee and humanitarian crises is off the foreign policy agenda, and the defection of the U.S. from multilateral regimes weakens the global order.

Conclusion

Migration is both a cause and a consequence of political and economic change, and, like trade, it is a fundamental feature of the postwar liberal order. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has led states to close their borders, disrupting supply chains, and severely curtailing migration and mobility. If the pandemic leads to further closure of societies and economies and to more nationalism, the international system will descend into greater anarchy, disorder and war. Human and economic development will suffer and global inequalities

will rise. The more powerful states, like the U.S. and China, will set the trend for the rest of the world, and in both states, nationalism has surged to the fore, setting the stage for more conflict as new power blocs emerge and international cooperation recedes.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/international-migrant-stock-2019.html>
- 2 <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/why-todays-migration-crisis-issue-global-economic-inequality>
- 3 James F. Hollifield, Pia Orrenius, and Thomas Osang (eds.). *Trade, Migration and Development*. Dallas: Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 2006.
- 4 James F. Hollifield, and Neil Foley (eds.) forthcoming. *Understanding Global Migration*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.
- 5 https://www.washingtonpost.com/immigration/coronavirus-trump-immigration-suspension/2020/04/22/4f0efdb8-84c1-11ea-ae26-989cfce1c7c7_story.html
- 6 Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- 7 <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018>

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