

Central American Migrants take Action on Trade and Regional Integration

By Oscar Chacón | July 13, 2003

On May 12, a large contingent from the office of the U.S. Trade Representative and smaller delegations from Central American Economic ministries began to fill hotel rooms in Guatemala City's fancy 10th Zone in preparation for the fourth round of negotiations toward a Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Amid receptions and press conferences, they settled in to discuss the details of smoothing the path for flows of capital and goods throughout the region.

That same day, a smaller delegation of Central American immigrant leaders arrived in Guatemala from the United States to present a very different vision of regional integration. Members of the five-person delegation traveled from Houston, New York, Chicago, and Miami to voice their concerns about the pace and content of the proposed agreement. Their presence in Guatemala represented another step in an emergent process of deepening political engagement by Central American immigrants in policies that affect their communities—both in the U.S. and in their countries of origin.

Over the past several decades, the Americas have become a hemisphere of migrants. International migrants manifest in their own lives the problems with current models of globalization. They also represent a potentially powerful new transnational constituency for reform and alternatives.

Between 1.75 and 4 million Central Americans currently live in the United States. Unquestionably, migration flows constitute a critical element of the economic and social relationship between the U.S. and Central America. These immigrants send approximately \$5.5 billion home each year in family remittances, which have now become the largest source of external support for the region.

Though they have received little attention from regional policymakers, or even from civil society advocates, Central American emigrant communities bring a distinct and critical set of experiences and interests to discussions of regional economic integration. Their ever-growing numbers bear powerful testament to the failure of current economic models to generate opportunities for sustainable and dignified livelihoods in Central America.

The perspectives of these communities in relationship to regional integration processes go beyond taking a posi-

tion “for” or “against” CAFTA. For many Central American immigrants living in the U.S., current discussions of regional integration focused only on trade and investment are woefully incomplete. The experience of ten years under NAFTA has left Mexican cities staggering under the burden of new arrivals from the countryside. Another 3-6 million Mexicans still live under constant uncertainty as undocumented migrants in the United States. Although Central American nations can reasonably expect similar tendencies in their countries under a CAFTA, their governments have not developed comprehensive policies to address these rising levels of migration. Nor have they examined the key root cause of migration—the lack of job opportunities at home.

This failure to tackle one of the most prominent consequences of regional integration has come at great cost to millions of immigrants from Central America who live and work in precarious and unacceptable conditions in the United States. All Central American immigrants, including undocumented ones, pay taxes. Their labor played a critical role in the tremendous economic growth the U.S. experienced during the 1990s. However, undocumented Central Americans in the U.S. do not enjoy basic labor protections and are unable to travel freely to visit family members in their countries of origin.

Close to half a million undocumented immigrants from Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador currently are protected from deportation and receive work permits under special Temporary Protected Status (TPS) programs for those nationalities. But like undocumented migrants, they cannot travel back and forth between the U.S. and their countries of origin. The annual renewal of their status is subject to the discretion of the U.S. government bureaucracy and does not represent in any way a sustainable solution to the Central America-U.S. migratory relationship.



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Central American immigrants are beginning to organize to demand that their needs be considered by the governments of their countries of residence and origin in the context of a reformulation of the economic relationship between the U.S. and Central America. The agenda they bring to the CAFTA negotiations is multi-faceted. First, they are demanding a new policy regime regulating the movement of people between Central America and the

United States. Second, as transnational communities that have been and continue to be affected by the implementation of an export-oriented economic model in Central America, they present a substantive critique of the proposed free trade agreement and set forth basic principles to guide the process.

The Central American immigrant leaders' delegation to Guatemala issued the following statement on May 12:

A truly beneficial integration process between the U.S. and the Central American region would require, among other things, a new legal paradigm that would provide a realistic and just approach to migration both within the region and toward the United States. Such a regime would need to resolve the following issues in a mutually satisfactory manner:

- 1. The migration status of all the Central Americans who reside in the United States but who are not permanent residents or citizens of the U.S.**
- 2. The desires of thousands of Central American legal permanent residents and naturalized U.S. citizens to petition for family members to join them as soon as possible.**
- 3. The future immigration flows between Central America and the United States that will occur in addition to those already mentioned.**

As transnational communities with roots in the Central American region, we are very concerned about the risks that a free trade agreement with the United States could pose for the well-being of Central Americans. We fear that the current negotiations could end up achieving little more than a deepening of the current economic policy model. Unfortunately, that model has failed to create dignified economic opportunities for the majority of Central Americans, and has contributed to the conditions that have provoked the emigration patterns we see today in the region.

Specifically, we believe that a regional integration agreement with the United States needs to incorporate the following basic principles:

- 1. Agricultural policies should support and promote the rural sector, and should avoid the displacement that small producers in Mexico have suffered under nearly ten years of NAFTA. In the absence of an integrated development plan, and lacking an agreement for free movement of labor across borders, the future of the families who could be displaced by changes in the countryside is of grave concern.**
- 2. Policies related to the provision of basic services must guarantee consumer protections, including access and quality of services. The tendency in the current CAFTA negotiations is to open nearly all services to international market competition. In practice, this would require privatization of such essential services as: health care, water, telecommunications, etc. The decision to privatize or not should be subject to an open and democratic debate in each country, rather than decided in the context of a trade agreement.**
- 3. There must be more transparency in the negotiations and in all aspects of public administration. To date, the process has lacked transparency and the rapid pace of the negotiations makes democratic oversight very difficult.**
- 4. Regional integration must be based on a participatory, integrated approach that includes economic, political, social and cultural aspects. In the absence of protections for basic rights, including labor rights and the right to a healthy environment, it will be impossible to create the foundations for sustainable and dignified development.**
- 5. The negotiation calendar should be extended as long as necessary to resolve the points mentioned here and to ensure that a truly democratic dialogue takes place between the citizens of the region and their governments.**

We take this opportunity to express our concern with the current model of economic integration that CAFTA aims to broaden and deepen. If economic integration only serves to exacerbate the already profound gulf between the rich and the poor in the region, it could provoke a worsening of the security situation, or even a return to the violence of past decades. Such an outcome would constitute a real tragedy for the region.

Members of the delegation:

Bernardo Villela, Congreso Guatemalteco or National Guatemalan Congress (CONGUATE), Miami, Florida

Oscar Chacón, Enlaces América, Chicago, IL

Marlon González, Agencia Guatemalteca para la Unidad y la Información (GUIA), Miami, FL

Teodoro Aguiluz, Red Nacional Salvadoreña Americana (SANN), Houston, TX

Pablo Gómez, Coalición Garífona, Bronx, NY

The initiative by immigrant leaders to insert themselves into regional policymaking forums as actors with their own distinct set of needs is a new phenomenon, one that is jarring to governments who are not accustomed to being held accountable by these communities.

Immigrants have experienced firsthand the devastating effects of the current economic model being implemented throughout the region. While they need education about the specifics of these policies and seek greater organizational capacity-building, they do not need to be convinced of the structural failures and unsustainability of the current model of economic development.

As the Central American leadership delegation prepared to return from Guatemala, participants had already begun strategizing about the next negotiation round. But time is short and the task is daunting. A training program in the ABC's of trade and integration is just getting started. Members of different immigrant-led organizations and networks have only recently begun to meet regularly to formulate joint positions on policy issues. Even as the public education efforts get underway, the CAFTA process moves forward at an unprecedented pace, with the negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) not far behind.

Still, these immigrant leaders remain unshaken in their conviction that immigrant communities simply cannot sit on the sidelines as regional integration policies unfold. The trade deal negotiated in Central America will lay the groundwork for the more comprehensive negotiations for the FTAA. Migrant communities already carry a heavy economic burden in the region. If they can mobilize political power to match it, perhaps they could begin to

envision and advance a new type of integration—one that includes mechanisms for safe and humane migration, protection of human rights, environmental safeguards, and creation of dignified opportunities for rural and urban populations throughout the region.

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LINKS

Enlaces América

<http://www.enlacesamerica.org/>

(In Spanish) Iniciativa Mesoamericana Comercio, Integración y Desarrollo Sostenible CID

<http://www.iniciativacid.org/>

CAFTA resources of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace webpage:

<http://www.ceip.org/files/news/>

[CAFTA-resource-page.asp?from=newsnews](http://www.ceip.org/files/news/CAFTA-resource-page.asp?from=newsnews)

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http://www.americaspolicy.org/commentary/2003/sp_0303guerra.html

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José Merino del Río | February 20, 2003

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/commentary/2003/0302caftacr.html>

CAFTA: una perspectiva costarricense: Un tratado cargado de cadenas
por José Merino del Río | 12 de febrero de 2003
http://www.americaspolicy.org/commentary/2003/sp_0302caftacr.html

CAFTA: Free Trade vs. Democracy
by Mark Engler | January 30, 2003
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by Vincent McElhinny | January 17, 2003
<http://www.americaspolicy.org/commentary/2003/0301cafta.html>

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by Beverly Bell, Center for Economic Justice | Nov. 1, 2002
<http://www.americaspolicy.org/reports/2002/0211soc-mov.html>

Central America: Ready for Free Trade with United States
by Joachim Bamrud | February 22, 2002
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