

# **INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN LATIN AMERICA: OLD ISSUES, EMERGING PROBLEMS AND THE NEED FOR A MULTINATIONAL APPROACH IN MIGRATION POLICIES<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Latin America is a multi-ethnic and multicultural region with over 650 indigenous peoples currently recognized by its States. These peoples are highly diverse, but their common denominator is the structural discrimination they suffer in the form of marginalization, exclusion and poverty. In this context, indigenous international migration is becoming more significant, not so much because of its quantitative impacts, but because of the particular traits of indigenous migrants and the policy implications for human rights. Migration is directly linked to land, natural resources, territories and territoriality, which have a dual dimension: as a cultural and ethnic “anchoring” factor; and as a factor in expulsion, owing to impoverishment and growing pressure on indigenous lands and resources. Since this is a multicultural and pluri-ethnic process, new concepts need to be developed in order to: a) distinguish indigenous international migration in the true sense from the indigenous people’s ancestral territorial mobility, and b) incorporate these issues in regional and national agendas about international migration under a human rights perspective.

## **Introduction**

Latin America is a multi-ethnic and multicultural region with over 650 indigenous peoples currently recognized by its States. These peoples are highly diverse, but their common denominator is the structural discrimination they suffer in the form of marginalization, exclusion and poverty. Latin America’s indigenous peoples have gone through four major cycles of crisis, each of which has been driven by global forces that have put pressure on their territories and challenged their capacity for survival: conquest in the sixteenth century, the Bourbon reforms in the late eighteenth century; the expansion of the liberal republics in the second half of the nineteenth century; and the global neo-liberal structural adjustments of the late twentieth century. Each of these cycles and crises generated indigenous resistance until the new political and territorial status quo became established, after which a period of population recovery followed. In this context, indigenous mobility shows various aspects: as a mechanism for the reproduction of discrimination or, eventually, one of empowerment. Its study is related to the challenge for building multicultural democracies, which lies not only in eliminating inequities and adopting a Rights perspective, but also in acknowledging the contributions of the region’s indigenous peoples in terms of identity, world views, roots and humanity.

Hence the need to include the problem of indigenous migration in the regional and national agenda, bearing in mind those specifics that might distinguish it from migration by other populations. Moreover, it is necessary to distinguish indigenous international migration in the true sense from the indigenous people’s ancestral territorial mobility.

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<sup>1</sup> This document is based in a chapter included in Social Panorama 2006 (ECLAC, 2006).

It is estimated there are 671 indigenous peoples in Latin America today, over half of whom are settled in tropical forest areas. The major demographic groups are located in the Andean and Meso-American countries. The common term “indigenous”, however, requires further specification as to the particular situation and status of each people. Although they are traditionally viewed as rural populations, their current status shows a diversity of territorial and demographic situations, ranging from peoples living in voluntary isolation to urban and even transnational settlements. Migration is directly linked to land, natural resources, territories and territoriality, which have a dual dimension: as a cultural and ethnic “anchoring” factor; and as a factor in expulsion, owing to impoverishment and growing pressure on indigenous lands and resources. Indigenous international migration is becoming more significant, beyond its quantitative impacts, due to the particular traits of indigenous migrants and the policy implications for human rights.

The information available shows that international migration among indigenous peoples in Latin America mainly occurs as cross-border migration, clearly reflecting both patterns mentioned above: in some cases, indigenous international migrants settle on rural land belonging to their ethnic group’s ancestral territory which has been fragmented by national borders; in other cases, they head mostly for urban areas. This is indicative of the non-voluntary and collective nature of indigenous migration, which leads migrants to maintain their social and economic links with their community of origin and to reproduce sociocultural patterns at their destination, aided by family networks and involvement in organizations that uphold ethnic identity.

### **1. An emerging and little-known population issue**

While all societies and cultures have always experienced migrations, whether as origin or host societies, the new conditions driven by the global economy have intensified migration as never before and given it new meaning and content (Martínez, 2003). In recent decades there has been a major increase in international migration in the region, mostly towards North America and Europe (Martínez, 2003).

Many studies and publications exist on international migration (Portes, 2005), yet the subject of the international migration of indigenous peoples has attracted little attention. Only recently has it come strongly to the fore, mainly propelled by indigenous organizations themselves, which have emphasized the need to be aware of, understand and recognize of indigenous migration, not only in regards to its scale, characteristics and quantitative dimensions, but above all in relation to situations of vulnerability and exclusion and their human rights implications (Medina, 2006; Martínez, M., 2006; Espiniella, 2006). The international community has responded to the political challenges posed by migration among indigenous populations for origin and destination countries, and has recommended that systematic research, both quantitative and qualitative, should be conducted into the dynamics, routes and reasons for international migration and its impacts on the life of indigenous peoples. It is thus a prominent topic today for researchers, academics, international bodies and indigenous peoples (Stavenhagen; 2006; Kyle, 2000; Kearney and Besserer 1999, Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004; United Nations, 2006; Espiniella, 2006).

### **2. Old practices, shared triggers and far-off destinations**

From an ethno-historical perspective, the territorial mobility of indigenous peoples seems to have been a constant since before the Spanish arrival. At that time, most of the indigenous peoples were located somewhere on a continuum ranging from hunter-gatherer groups to agricultural societies (Aylwin, 2002). To a greater or lesser extent, most groups combined both methods of obtaining food. In the case of agricultural economies, population groups were at the mercy of periods of abundance and shortage, forcing them to migrate in search of either different foods or new lands and crops. In fact, some authors

have suggested that seasonal migrations, particularly of the transhumant type, were (and still are) a way of life, a practice and a “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1998), closely linked to social and biological reproduction.

As noted earlier, insufficient means to survive on their own lands, land tenure problems and crises in a rural economy increasingly linked to world markets, together with exclusion and various sorts of conflicts and human rights violations, have all been consistently cited as being the main factors forcing indigenous groups to leave their communities of origin, temporarily or permanently, in search of new openings (United Nations, 2006). Rather than being merely a way of seeking new opportunities in life, mobility therefore emerges as a last resort for both biological and cultural survival.

The close links between emigration, ethnic origin and poverty can be, however, reproduced in the place of arrival. As is the case with most migrants, discrimination may be reflected in economic terms, since indigenous people tend to work in the informal labour market and are relegated to the lowest levels; in social terms, since belonging to an indigenous people imposes additional discrimination factors, especially if indigenous migrants are undocumented and are subjected to racist and discriminatory attitudes from the rest of the population; and in political terms, since most migrants are deprived of their rights as full citizens, in both countries of origin and destination (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004).

Although no single pattern can be identified, migratory movements begin with seasonal and cyclical migrations, in which migrants stay for fairly long periods at their destinations. Some may settle permanently, yet still remain in contact with the community of origin. These cycles-especially in the case of Mexico and in some parts of Ecuador and Guatemala- are characterized by migrations occurring in waves (or stages), mainly towards major cities, then shifting gradually, through family networks, towards neighbouring countries (Velasco, 1998, 2002; Torres, 2005, Castillo, 1993, 1997).<sup>2</sup>

Now, in an increasingly globalized world, very few indigenous groups avoid migration as a means of economic and social reproduction. Nonetheless, ethnic groups vary in terms of destination and volume of migratory flows, distance covered, duration, patterns and the activities migrants perform in the places towards which they gravitate. This heterogeneity is reproduced in destination communities; the picture then becomes even more complex because, in addition to the status of the indigenous group in its place of origin, the socio-political context in the destination country also comes into play.

### **3. International migration: type, significance and context**

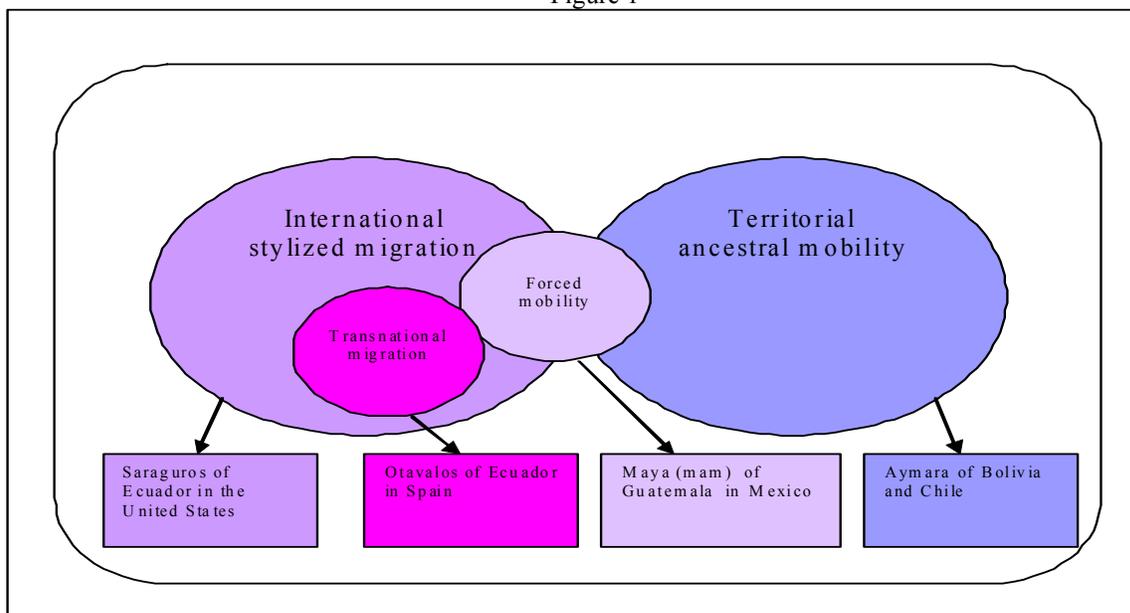
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<sup>2</sup> González Chévez (2001) describes the itinerary used by the Nahuatl people of Temalec, Mexico, in their migration and reproduction in two locations: Puerto Vallarta in Mexico and Waukegan, Illinois, United States. There was a massive exodus to Veracruz in the 1970s for the sugar-cane harvest and the migrants subsequently moved north to work as agricultural labourers in Nayarit. By the 1980s, cyclical migration had become insufficient and there was a community-wide migration to Puerto Vallarta. Those who emigrated, the less educated and those accustomed to unskilled agricultural work, became versatile casual workers, selling handicrafts to tourists. That first migratory movement was successful in economic and sociocultural terms, since ethnic identity and the language were retained, mainly thanks to close links with the migrants’ homeland, with their participation in and economic contributions to celebrations of traditional patron saints’ festivals. In the late 1980s, migration to the United States began, making use of family and ethnic links with the rural community in Puebla, with families or couples travelling together. All these immigrants entered the United States illegally and joined the workforce in Waukegan, Illinois. This has been a successful migration in labour terms, because of the cheap and flexible labour the migrants provide, combined with their large capacity for work. However, structural changes in all areas of community life (economic, religious, social, political and health-related) have narrowed the possibilities for preservation of cultural identity.

Indigenous migrants are not a homogenous group in terms of peoples or cultures or in respect to their places of origin or destination. This diversity should be considered in close association with two phenomena: the growth of international migration and the various efforts towards ethnocultural reconstruction. The pattern and density of those processes —whose contents and particularities of these processes are not yet fully known—leads to complex, multifaceted, and dynamic indigenous diasporas in both origin and destination communities (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

A number of authors, including indigenous organizations themselves, have highlighted the need to devise new concepts in order to understand international migration, starting from the basis that it is a multicultural and multi-ethnic phenomenon (Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004; United Nations, 2006) and making the distinction between migratory processes and mobility within ancestral lands. In this regard, the classification proposed here is illustrated in figure 1. The first aspect to be emphasized is the distinction between international migration and mobility within ancestral lands, because of their significance and consequences for policy and human rights. Furthermore, within each of those types, two subcategories exist:

Figure 1



Source: Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-Population Division of ECLAC.

**Territorial mobility within ethnic boundaries.** This concerns ethnic groups living in a territory which has been fragmented by the borders of nation-states. Although crossing international borders, such

<sup>3</sup> The concept of diaspora and other analogous concepts such as transnationalism seek to emphasize the sense of constant change in the formation of communities and in migratory flows, as well as the sense of creation and recreation of migrants' identity (López Castro, 2003).

mobility takes place inside ancestral territories within the ethnic boundaries where indigenous people have exercised and continue to exercise common-law rights.

**Forced mobility, either across jurisdictional borders or within ethnic boundaries.** From a structural viewpoint it has been argued that indigenous migration—in the form of collective migration and survival-related—is not voluntary, but the specific term “forced mobility” has been retained here to denote indigenous peoples crossing jurisdictional borders or moving within ethnic boundaries because of armed conflict, widespread violence, human rights violations or natural or man-made disasters.<sup>4</sup> In cases of forced mobility across jurisdictional borders, there are better chances of creating transnational links (Portes, 2005).

**Transnational indigenous migration.** This refers to international migrants who, through social groups, families, networks and collectivities or organizations, have recreated community links beyond national frontiers, thus extending ethnic boundaries. This type of migration has two fundamental traits: (a) constant exchanges between the communities of origin and destination that transcend trade and family relations; and (b) institutionalization of these links through organizations which preserve and rebuild them (Portes, 2005).

**International stylized migration.** This refers to indigenous migrants crossing national borders outside their areas of ancestral mobility, and who are unlikely to maintain institutionalized links with their communities of origin, even when ethnic identity and family connections exist. This is the most direct record offered by census information of Latin American countries.

To the extent possible, this classification serves as a guide to help interpret the information available, to the extent possible. Censuses have served to quantify indigenous international migration in each of the 10 countries selected. It should be noted that the numbers may have been underestimated, since it is likely that an unknown portion of these migrants are undocumented.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in some countries the numbers of indigenous people born elsewhere can be captured only when they belong to groups already present in the destination country.

#### **4. Magnitudes and trends: a regional comparison**

The data in figure 2 shows that indigenous peoples have a lower propensity to emigrate than non-indigenous peoples. The main exceptions are Costa Rica, where indigenous international migrants more than double non-indigenous migrants (with a difference of 11.8 percentage points) and, to a lesser extent, Brazil (0.21 points).

Figure 2

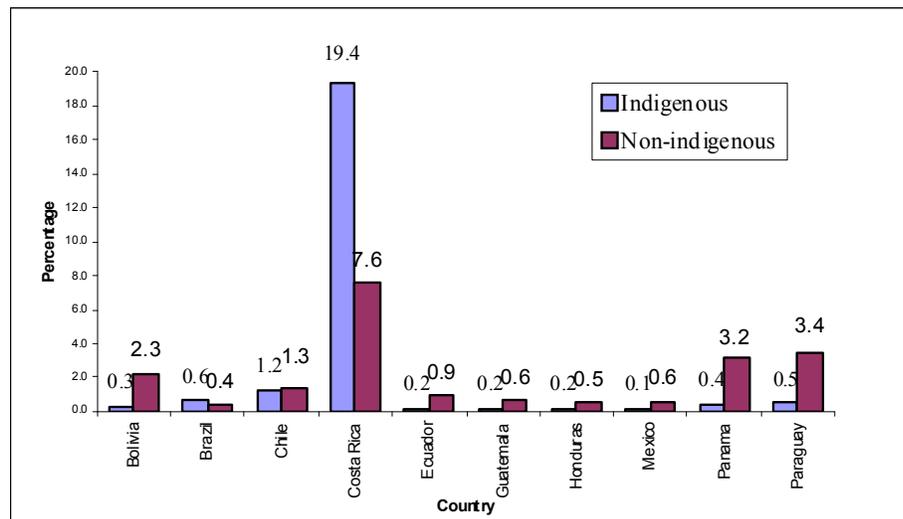
#### **LATIN AMERICA (10 COUNTRIES): INTERNATIONAL LIFETIME MIGRANTS, INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS, 2000 CENSUS ROUND**

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<sup>4</sup> The term “displaced” has not been used, since it refers only to population movements within national borders (although it would be the correct term if the population group moves within ethnocultural boundaries). Also, the term “refugee” has not been used generically, since not all indigenous people forced to leave their original communities are or request the status of refugees.

<sup>5</sup> Although there are no exhaustive studies to quantify this phenomenon, the National Population Council of Mexico (CONAPO) (2001) has estimated that 70% of indigenous immigrants to the United States are undocumented. Qualitative studies in the United States on Ecuadorian, Guatemalan and Mexican indigenous migrants have shown that the great majority of them are undocumented.

(Percentages)



**Source:** Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-Population Division of ECLAC, special processing of census microdatabases.

As for relative magnitude, international indigenous migrants represent a very small proportion of each country's indigenous population (less than 1.3%). The opposite is true only in Costa Rica, where one fifth of the indigenous population was born in other countries (19.4%). The lesser magnitude of international indigenous migration, which has been described in other research, is related to two main phenomena: first, indigenous peoples' unbreakable ties to their lands, which function as an anchor (although survival needs may force them to migrate elsewhere) and, second, the structural disadvantage facing indigenous peoples who adopt the uncertain and costly strategy of international migration. This is in addition to the risk of finding themselves in an illegal situation and the difficulty of going unnoticed, because of their clothing, behaviour or language (Castillo, 1993, 1997; Castañeda, Mans and Davenport, 2002). Although international indigenous migration is small in magnitude, it must be recalled that indigenous peoples are one of the most vulnerable social groups, in which poverty and ethnic origin, two of the "structural aetiologies of discrimination" (Martínez, J., 2006), are combined.

The magnitude of immigration varies greatly from country to country. At least five groups of countries can be distinguished. Bolivia and Costa Rica are host to the greatest numbers of international indigenous migrants, approximately 17,000 and 12,000 respectively. Chile, Guatemala and Mexico each have just over 8,000; Brazil, around 4,500; Ecuador and Panama, a little over 1,000, and Honduras and Paraguay, less than 800 each.

International migration, both indigenous and non-indigenous, is seen to be basically intraregional, reflecting the pattern already described for the Latin American migrant population as a whole (Martínez, 2003). Among indigenous people, however, the pattern is more striking. Nine of every 10 indigenous immigrants come from within the region and in Costa Rica the proportion is as high as 99.5% (ECLAC, 2006).

Honduras and Mexico are unusual in this respect, with a large proportion of immigrants born in the United States (17% and 30%, respectively). This may reflect second-generation migration, involving the children of migrants who have moved to the United States since the 1950s in the framework of State programmes to attract labour. In the case of Mexico, migration from the United States is proportionally higher among non-indigenous people. Honduras shows a different pattern, since indigenous and non-indigenous immigrants come from the United States in equal proportion.

Two main situations are observed: in Bolivia and Guatemala, about one in five international migrants have an indigenous background; in the other countries, international indigenous migrants make up less than 5% of all migrants. If international migrants are confined to Latin Americans, the proportion of indigenous people increases for most countries, which supports the assertion regarding the intraregional bias of migration. The information available, however, does not capture the phenomenon of migration towards the United States, one of the main destinations for Guatemalan, Honduran and Mexican indigenous peoples, among others. Notably, there also appears to be a return migration, apparent in Honduras and Mexico, which record significant indigenous immigration from the United States.

Typically, indigenous and non-indigenous international immigrants are mostly men, though Chile and Guatemala are exceptions for both groups, as is Honduras for the non-indigenous group. Since most indigenous migration is from within Latin America, this pattern of male predominance holds good in the region. This is not the case for non-indigenous immigrants of Latin American origin, however, who comprise mainly women in seven countries, reflecting what has been called the “quantitative feminization” of migration in the region (Martínez, 2003).

The relative predominance of males among indigenous immigrants can also be seen in two pieces of research into gender differentials in indigenous migration, which is associated mainly with agricultural labour (CONAPO, 2001, Kyle, 2000). The predominance of men tends to support the idea of labour migration. Chile and Honduras, however, receive more female immigrants, as noted above, which may also have to do with better employment opportunities for women, especially in the informal labour market and in domestic service. Aside from quantitative considerations, the gender perspective should be considered in all cases, not only focusing on women as facilitators of migration through family networks, but also realizing that gender relations “organize” migration, determining how it takes place, who migrates, and what roles each family member will play in both host and origin countries (Martínez, 2003).

Clearly, more research is still needed on how gender relations affect migratory processes and the ways in which women’s role in indigenous societies favours them or holds them back, as well as the impact of migration on gender empowerment. In structural terms, as a subordinate group, indigenous women are more seriously vulnerable. But more extensive research is needed into the characteristics of each ethnic group and its context. For example, some local studies in Mexico have suggested that contact with new social agents in their places of destination can help indigenous women to become more autonomous. This can also happen in some communities of origin, where male emigration has had the unexpected effect of prompting women to move into roles traditionally confined to men (Fox and Rivera Salgado, 2004).

A number of authors agree that, since 1990, indigenous international migration has grown in magnitude and has diversified in terms of the peoples who migrate and in terms of their places of origin and destination (García Ortega, 2004; Lewin and Guzmán, 2005; Kyle, 2000; Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004). Although what is known thus far is fragmented and incomplete, census data support the empirical deduction that the phenomenon is indeed increasing (see table1). This trend is observed in both indigenous and non-indigenous groups, but in the 1990s it was more marked among indigenous peoples in Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, and Honduras. In Guatemala, 73.7% of indigenous immigrants arrived in

1990-1995; probably a consequence of return migration from Mexico, which was promoted by the Guatemalan State in 1993 (Castillo, 1997).

Table 1  
**INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS INTERNATIONAL IMMIGRANTS, BY FIVE-YEAR  
ARRIVAL PERIODS**  
*(Percentages)*

Country of residence	Ethnic status	Arrival period a/					Total
		Pre 1980	1980-1985	1985-1990	1990-1995	1995-2000	
Bolivia	Indigenous	13.9	5.4	9.4	23.0	48.3	100.0
	Non-indigenous	21.1	7.8	8.9	21.1	40.9	100.0
Brazil	Indigenous	28.6	12.5	17.1	19.0	22.7	100.0
	Non-indigenous	73.1	5.9	5.0	5.2	10.8	100.0
Chile	Indigenous	24.4	6.3	8.3	20.8	40.2	100.0
	Non-indigenous	17.6	6.4	8.9	18.9	48.1	100.0
Costa Rica	Indigenous	9.6	6.3	7.1	21.1	55.9	100.0
	Non-indigenous	10.6	7.6	9.1	20.8	52.0	100.0
Ecuador	Indigenous	20.7	10.6	9.4	13.6	45.8	100.0
	Non-indigenous	21.7	9.9	9.9	15.1	43.4	100.0
Guatemala	Indigenous	0.8	0.4	2.4	73.7	22.7	100.0
	Non-indigenous	12.6	5.0	9.6	38.4	34.5	100.0
Honduras	Indigenous	25.1	12.9	8.5	15.6	37.9	100.0
	Non-indigenous	22.9	13.2	10.7	16.8	36.4	100.0
Paraguay	Indigenous	35.5	16.8	15.0	15.0	17.8	100.0
	Non-indigenous	27.3	17.7	19.7	16.2	19.1	100.0

**Source:** Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-Population Division of ECLAC, special processing of census microdatabases.

a/ In order to standardize the data, five-year periods were constructed before the date of each country's census. For example, in the case of Bolivia the period 1995-2000 strictly speaking corresponds to 1996-2001.

## 5. Mixed patterns: ancient territories, new frontiers and complex identities

### a) International migration or mobility within ancestral lands?

The subject of migratory movements in frontier zones or "grey areas" is recognized as highly complex. Nonetheless, the specific case of indigenous peoples as ethnocultural units which have been fragmented by national borders is practically absent from the literature on international migration. Such situations, which to a greater or lesser extent date back to the arrival of the conquistadors, were consolidated towards the end of the nineteenth century with the creation of the Latin American nation-States. Interesting enough, even today a number of binational and even trinational ethnic groups and indigenous peoples who have maintained cultural and family links can be identified.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the

<sup>6</sup> Guatemalan Mayas have inhabited the area of Mexico's border from precolonial times, when this territory was shared by a number of indigenous peoples who interacted within a vast Meso-American region. The conquistadors set up a model of political and social domination and made changes to the existing networks of relations and trade. Later, the national borders drawn between Guatemala and Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century disrupted

socio-political characteristics of the countries in which they live have impressed certain traits upon these groups (Castillo, 1993). ILO Convention No. 169 (article 32) provides for special protection for indigenous peoples in border areas and urges governments to “take appropriate measures, including by means of international agreements, to facilitate contacts and co-operation between indigenous and tribal peoples across borders, including activities in the economic, social, cultural, spiritual and environmental fields” (article 32). IDB adds that acceptance of dual nationality or special mechanisms to facilitate contact across borders are also important measures. However, only two countries in the region—the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Ecuador—guarantee this right. (IDB/ECLAC, 2004).

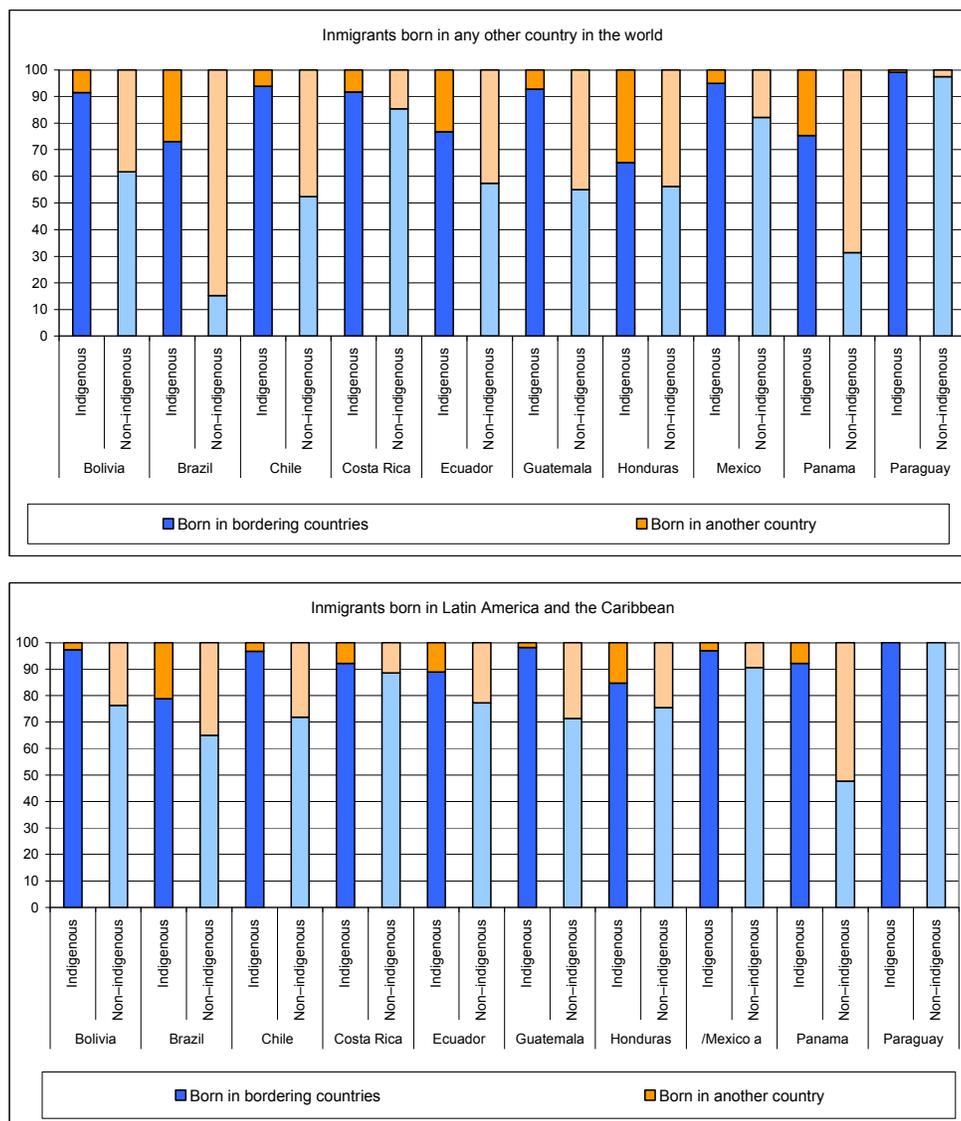
From the viewpoint of sovereign States (and of censuses) international migration occurs only when a physical frontier (or jurisdictional territory) is crossed, not when people move outside an ethnic and territorial unit, which would be considered as mobility within ancestral territory. The distinction between ethnic and national boundaries thus becomes blurred if territory is viewed not only as an administrative and jurisdictional entity, or as a geographical area, but also from the viewpoint of habitat, heritage, biodiversity, and basis for identity (Toledo, 2005). Complicating the picture further, some traditionally nomadic indigenous groups, as is the case of some peoples in the Amazon region, travel through territories in which national borders are meaningless or unknown to them (United Nations, 2006).

Closer analysis and the use of bordering countries as a category reveal one of the most prominent traits of indigenous immigration: its typically cross-border nature. In Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Panama and Paraguay, nine of every 10 indigenous immigrants come from a neighbouring country. This is not the case for non-indigenous immigrants, except for Costa Rica, Mexico and Paraguay (see figure 3). If the sample is restricted to Latin America, practically all indigenous immigrants in any given country were born in a neighbouring country. These conclusions raise the challenge of distinguishing whether a given situation is genuinely international migration between neighbouring countries or simply territorial mobility within ethnic boundaries, as mentioned earlier. To what extent can these two types of behaviour be represented using the information available?

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many links but, to this day, ties of family kinship and close friendship form a dynamic that blurs the distinction of borders. These ethnic roots, common history, cultural proximity and bonds of affection facilitated a continuous movement of indigenous migrants into Mexico and facilitated the establishment of refugee camps in this country in the 1980s and 1990s, in a reflection of true social protection and solidarity networks (Castillo 1997).

**Figure 3**  
**INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS INTERNATIONAL IMMIGRANTS BORN IN**  
**BORDERING OR OTHER COUNTRIES, BY COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE AND**  
**INDIGENOUS STATUS, 2000 CENSUS ROUND**  
*(Percentages)*



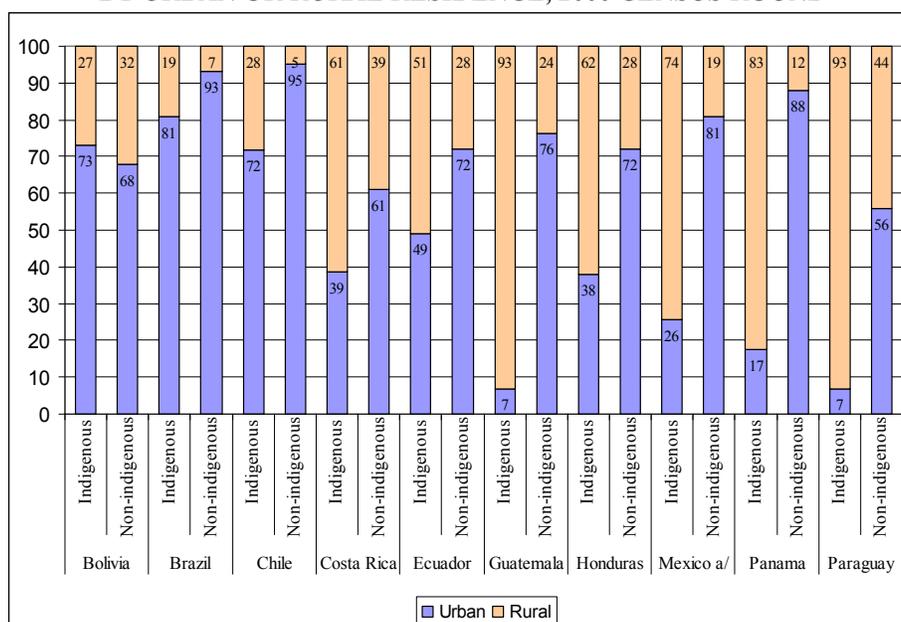
**Source:** Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-Population Division of ECLAC, special processing of census microdatabases.

a/ Includes immigrants from the United States.

A first approximation can be achieved by studying migrants' destinations. Indigenous immigrants have been observed to settle in rural areas more than non-indigenous immigrants, who tend to settle mostly in urban areas (see figure 4). The exception is Bolivia, where the structure of population groups dates back to precolonial times; the Bolivian *altiplano* (high plateau) is one of the crossroads of the Andean culture. Comparatively speaking, indigenous peoples' settlement patterns show greater variation: in four countries

(Guatemala, Mexico, Panama and Paraguay) indigenous immigrants settle mainly in rural areas, with the figures ranging from 74% to 93%; in three others (Costa Rica, Ecuador and Honduras) they still tend to choose rural areas, although in lower proportions between 51% and 62%. In the three countries where the indigenous population lives mostly in urban areas (Bolivia, Brazil and Chile), most indigenous migrants also settle in such areas. Mobility towards rural areas provides initial evidence of a type of migration linked to ancestral territories, and it will now be attempted to illustrate this by examining the situation of indigenous peoples fragmented by national borders.

Figure 4  
**DISTRIBUTION IN THE HOST COUNTRY OF INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS INTERNATIONAL IMMIGRANTS BORN IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN, BY URBAN OR RURAL RESIDENCE, 2000 CENSUS ROUND**



**Source:** Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-Population Division of ECLAC, special processing of census microdatabases.

a/ Includes the United States, which is a neighbouring country.

Among the countries for which data disaggregated by ethnic group were available (because the question was included in the census questionnaire), the countries selected were those having the greatest numbers of indigenous immigrants from groups inhabiting lands that are now, in terms of State boundaries, split between neighbouring countries. The total number of indigenous immigrants included in table 2 represents more than 85% of each country's international indigenous migration, except for Guatemala, where the Mam and Q'anjob'al make up 59%. With the exception of the Garífuna, almost all the migrants in each group had been born in a neighbouring country. These results are conclusive as regards the need to guarantee special protection for indigenous peoples living in border areas and —where appropriate— to the need to recognize their ancestral territorial mobility as being qualitatively different from international migration. Chile offers a striking example through its Quechua residents, of whom one in three were born in a neighbouring country.

Table 2  
INTERNATIONAL INDIGENOUS IMMIGRANTS, BY INDIGENOUS GROUP

Country of residence	International indigenous immigrants, by indigenous group			
	Indigenous group	Total immigrants	Percentage of the whole group a/	Percentage born in bi- or trinalational territories b/
Bolivia c/	Quechua	3 148	0.2	92.6
	Aymara	1 817	0.1	92.7
	Guaraní	574	0.8	90.8
	Chiquitano	442	0.4	83.4
Chile	Quechua	2075	33.6	94.9
	Aymara	4190	8.6	98.9
	Mapuche	1910	0.3	81.4
Guatemala	Mam	2333	0.4	98.5
	Q'anjob'al	2455	1.5	99.3
Honduras	Garífuna	326	0.7	9.5
	Misquito	147	0.3	97.9
	Chortí	244	0.7	92.4
Panama	Emberá	583	2.6	99.1
	Wounaan	226	3.3	98.1
	Ngôbe	129	0.1	52.7
	Kuna	107	0.2	43.9
Paraguay	Avaguaraní	186	1.3	98.4
	Western Guaraní	50	2.1	86.0
	Mbya	78	0.5	91.0
	Paitavytera	55	0.4	96.4

**Source:** Latin American and Caribbean Demographic Centre (CELADE)-Population Division of ECLAC, special processing of census microdatabases.

a/ Total international indigenous immigrants belonging to a particular group in relation to that group's total population in the country of residence.

b/ For each group, the countries where ancestral lands are located were identified. For example, for the Quechua people in Bolivia the figure corresponds to the total number of Quechua people born in Argentina, Chile and Peru in relation to all Quechuas born outside Bolivia but residing in that country.

c/ Refers to those aged 15 years and over, since identification of ethnic group was confined to that universe in the census.

Although jurisdictional borders are being crossed, these results raise the question of whether, the mobility is taking place within ethnocultural areas and should therefore be considered indigenous territorial mobility. This is not necessarily the case, since it depends on whether or not migrants settle in areas that correspond to ancestral territories with shared sociocultural links. As for destinations, although the rural preference of indigenous immigrants is significant, it is not sufficient evidence by itself. In certain groups, the places of residence of indigenous immigrants seem to reflect both patterns, migration and mobility, even within a single ethnic group. In the case of the Quechua people living in Chile, 89% of those born in Bolivia settle in the country's First and Second Regions (Tarapacá and Antofagasta), which are part of the Quechua ancestral territories. Quechua people born in Peru, on the other hand, tend to gravitate (73%) to the Metropolitan Region. As for Aymara immigrants born in Bolivia and Peru and residing in Chile, 90% live in the First and Second Regions, mostly the former. Lastly, of Argentine-born Mapuches, 52% settle in Araucanía, los Lagos and the Bio Bio region, which are within Mapuche territory, whereas 15% reside in the Metropolitan Region.

Despite this variety, there is also a discernable current of international migration in the proper sense, towards capitals or major cities, with Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Costa Rica being the most representative

examples. The magnitude of this migration is less significant, however, in comparison with settlement patterns among non-indigenous migrants. In the aforementioned countries, no more than 30% of indigenous international immigrants reside in the urban areas of the major administrative divisions corresponding to the country's largest city: 13% in Panama province; 16% in Santa Cruz; 20% in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago; 24% in San José and 30% in São Paulo. In the remaining countries the numbers are below 5%. Urban indigenous migrants generally follow the territorial distribution pattern described above, since they tend to live in towns located close to their ancestral territories. This reinforces the idea of family migration, mostly through networks of relatives (Aravena, 2000).

The case of Costa Rica, which has the highest proportion of international indigenous migrants, is a good example of the diversity in this regard, as well as of the need to draw a distinction between the different types of migrants according to their indigenous groups and to their circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Of all international indigenous migrants in the country, 39% live in urban areas and 61% in rural areas (see figure 4). A high proportion of those in urban areas live in San José (62%); although it is not known which ethnic groups they belong to, the majority were born in the neighbouring country of Nicaragua (77%). As for rural settlement, there is some evidence of ancestral territorial mobility. Of the international indigenous migrants living in rural areas, 55% are in Puntarenas and Limón (which cover most of the indigenous territories), most of whom were born in the neighbouring country of Panama. Furthermore, of the international indigenous migrants arriving in Puntarenas, 30% reside in indigenous territories as such.

The idea of international migration which is qualitatively different from ancestral mobility is reflected indirectly in the use of indigenous languages. A number of studies have shown that this declines inexorably from one generation to the next, at least in terms of magnitude, mostly because of discrimination, social stigma, and the lack of functionality of those languages in new urban environments (Albarracín, Alderetes and Pappalardo, 2001). Census data show that in Guatemala and Mexico, international indigenous immigrants settling in rural areas retain their languages practically to the same extent as non-migrants (about 80%); in urban areas, however, only 25% of migrants speak their indigenous languages, against 70% of non-migrant indigenous people. In Bolivia and Ecuador, international indigenous migrants retain their original languages to an even lesser extent, whether in urban or rural areas, although the downtrend is stronger in urban areas. These findings do not, however, necessarily mean that language loss is a consequence of migration. The process may have begun before migration; indeed, migration may be "selective", inasmuch as those who speak only the official language are more likely to migrate.

This assertion seems to apply more to the case of true international migration; in the case of cross-border mobility, the continued use of indigenous languages may be an important factor rather than a mere consequence. The figures for Guatemala and Mexico support this idea. Castillo (1997) notes that in the case of the Mayan people of Yucatán (mainly the Mam group) it was precisely the existence of a shared language and sociocultural background that encouraged migration from Guatemala to Mexico. Furthermore, the importance of indigenous language as a means of recreating cultural identity in a new living environment has been recognized and is one of the pillars on which transnational indigenous communities are built.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, in Costa Rica indigenous status was identified only in the 22 indigenous territories.

<sup>8</sup> The Otavalo Quichua of Ecuador has established transnational communities virtually throughout the world. They have used numerous means and strategies to reproduce, recreate and reinvent their ethnocultural identity, giving new meaning to their identity in the way they travel, emigrate and sell their crafts throughout the world. Indeed, these activities have formed the key to their integration in a globalized market economy and to the shaping of transnational cultures (Maldonado, 2005).

**(b) Indigenous international migration: voluntary or forced?**

One last aspect which has been high on the agenda for international organizations and experts is the extent to which indigenous migration is voluntary (United Nations, 2006; Espiniella, 2006). It has been suggested that, being collective and determined by structural social factors, it is at the least not comparable with freely chosen individual migration. In the case of indigenous groups migration is evidently a last resort for survival, which some authors have gone so far as to term an “exodus” (González Chévez, 2001). This is a subject that calls for more comprehensive analysis and whose implications links directly to the human and to the collective rights of indigenous peoples.

Unfortunately, population censuses are not the best tool for analysing such phenomena, which have to date been described in local research conducted by indigenous organizations and international human rights bodies. Two examples set forth some of the situations of forced mobility which have affected the indigenous peoples: Guatemala and Colombia.

In the first half of the 1980s, some 45,000 Guatemalan peasant farmers, many of them indigenous, arrived in Mexico seeking refuge from the life-threatening persecution they suffered in their homeland. They took refuge in camps along the border and, though their exact numbers are not known, with the help of local populations, they were able to spread out and settle in localities of different sizes. A further 50,000 refugees are reckoned to have dispersed throughout the region (American Watch Commitment).

Since the 1990s, 12 of the 84 indigenous groups in Colombia have been directly affected by the military conflict between the army, guerrillas, drug-traffickers and mining companies. As a last resort, some groups have moved across national borders; in the year 2000, a group of 200 indigenous Wounaan moved into Panama. Despite the danger, they returned to Colombia a few months later. Between 2001 and 2002, 10% of the indigenous population of the Department of Putumayo (estimated at more than 24,000) were displaced, some of them forced across the border into Ecuador.

In both cases of forced displacement —the Guatemalan Maya peoples and the Colombian indigenous groups— land and natural resources are at the heart of the conflict. In Guatemala, the army launched a persecution against groups of Maya in order to seize their lands, displacing entire communities who settled as refugees in Mexico and, in some cases, the United States (Castillo, 1993). In the Colombian case, indigenous peoples were “cornered” in their own territory and moved into Panama and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela only when their lives were at risk. So compelling is the struggle for the land and control over resources (many of which are now undergoing exploration and contract awards), that as soon as armed conflict abates, indigenous communities will return to their original communities, thus forfeiting refugee status in other countries (National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), 2006).

Research in this area is still scant. This is one of the major challenges in achieving a better understanding of international indigenous migration and improving the design of appropriate policies. Forced mobility, as a violation of human rights and a violent displacement, has direct consequences on the survival of indigenous communities and peoples and should therefore be brought to the public attention without delay.

## **Conclusions: the challenges of indigenous migration**

Latin America has seen renewed interest in indigenous issues as a matter of public policy since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and this has also been reflected in census studies and measurements, especially in the field of international migration. At the same time, the challenges of migration recognition and governance impose several requirements. Accordingly, demand for information is a recurring issue for governments, indigenous organizations, and international agencies; not only as a basic technical tool for the design, implementation, and assessment of public policies, but also for its undeniable political utility. In this connection, the production of demographic knowledge from a rights-based perspective constitutes a first step in achieving the statistical visibility required for the construction of a multi-ethnic citizenship in Latin America. Information on who, how many, and where indigenous people are, or their destination, is a basic input for policies and programmes, which need to be contextualized in territorial terms and be relevant in terms of content. In addition, population dynamics and migration form one of the bases for the sociocultural reproduction of indigenous peoples.

As a result of the emergence of indigenous movements as political actors and of the new human rights standards, almost all of the Latin American countries included questions on ethnic identity for the first time in the 2000 round of censuses. This offered the opportunity to make progress in building knowledge of indigenous population dynamics, migration, and their implications for public and multinational policies and strategies.

Simultaneously, in the region, there has been a frenzy of activity around the study and debate of the consequences of international migration. Numerous multilateral political initiatives have built an agenda on the subject, be it at the level of Latin American sub-regions, or at the Iberoamerican and American scales. International migration has gradually been associated with development processes and with the adoption of the Human Rights perspective. Advances in this line are promising since reductionist opinions on the consequences of migration have been questioned and formal principles for migration governance have been put forth. Nevertheless, reality shows there is still a long way to go before countries and migrants themselves benefit from these initiatives: besides the rigidities and asymmetries brought about by an agenda shared with developed countries, in our opinion, there is also the absence of an ethnic perspective in the studies and in the political discussion regarding international migration.

There are new studies and publications on international migration, yet the subject of international migration by indigenous peoples has attracted little attention. Only recently has it come strongly to the fore, propelled mainly by indigenous organizations themselves, which have emphasized the need to be aware of, understand, and take account of indigenous migration, not only in regards to its scale, characteristics, and quantitative dimensions, but above all in relation to situations of vulnerability and exclusion and human rights implications. Moreover, the international community has recently responded to the political challenges posed by migration among indigenous populations for origin and destination countries, and has recommended that systematic research, both quantitative and qualitative, should be conducted into the dynamics, routes and reasons for international migration and its impacts on the life of indigenous peoples. It is thus a prominent topic today for researchers, academics, international bodies, and indigenous peoples.

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