

# Multiethnic borders: Mexico-Guatemala-Belize migrations of agricultural sugar workers

## Fronteras multiétnicas: migraciones México-Guatemala-Belice de trabajadores agrícolas cañeros

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### Abstract

A characterization is presented for the sugar agroindustrial zones as regions multi-ethnic groups due to the large indigenous component of the sugarcane harvesting groups from the interior of Mexico, Belize and Guatemala. The study focuses on two transboundary areas: Rio Hondo (Mexico-Belize) and Soconusco (Mexico-Guatemala), within a broad context of labor mobility and cultural diversity. The results are based on systematic field work over several cycles of harvest to the present, and comparative references of the rest of the country collected with qualitative and quantitative techniques. The findings highlight the heterogeneous work profile and a great migratory experience of such a population and aim to rethink the logic of the temporary agricultural work in the Mexico-Central Caribbean connections; as well as the potential of the cultural and economic bonus of indigenous labor in the national harvest, between South-South.

**Keywords:** agricultural workers, workers on the southern border, cane cutters, agro-industrial labor market, multi-ethnic regions, southern border.

### Resumen

Se presenta una caracterización para las zonas agroindustriales azucareras como regiones multiétnicas en virtud del gran componente indígena de los grupos de cosecha de caña de azúcar provenientes del interior de México, Belice y Guatemala. El estudio se centra en dos áreas transfronterizas: Río Hondo (México-Belice) y el Soconusco (México-Guatemala), dentro de un amplio contexto de movilidad laboral y de diversidad cultural en la frontera sur. Los resultados parten de un trabajo de campo sistemático a lo largo de varios ciclos de cosecha hasta la zafra 2020-2021, y de referentes comparativos con el resto del país recolectados con técnicas cualitativas y cuantitativas.

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Los hallazgos resaltan el heterogéneo perfil laboral y una gran experiencia migratoria de tal población, y apuntan a repensar las lógicas Sur-Sur del trabajo agrícola temporal en las conexiones México-centrocaribeñas, así como el potencial del bono cultural y económico de la mano de obra indígena en la zafra nacional.

Palabras clave: trabajadores agrícolas, trabajadores en frontera sur, cortadores de caña, mercado laboral agroindustrial, regiones multiétnicas, frontera sur.

## Introduction

Despite the importance of sugar production in Mexico and the annual demand for labor during the sugarcane harvest (around 70 000 cane cutters between November and June, in fifteen states of the country), the labor market in the sugar agro-industry represents a universe that has been little explored in the specialized literature. This work continues the research that began ten years ago. This latest version offers a systematic reference on the sector, especially focused on southern Mexico, where seven sugarcane-producing regions coexist.

With the support of a research program on different harvest cycles in the sugarcane supply areas of Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala, and at a relevant distance from the first project (2009), this work presents a synthesis of three projects.<sup>1</sup> This background has been enriched with recent data. Among the various products of this research are academic articles, dissemination (texts and multimedia), and documents of public policy recommendations focused on indicators of decent work, gender, migration, and ethnicity. The characterization of multi-ethnic regions in sugar agro-industrial zones has not been addressed to date concerning cross-border labor mobility. This mobility is presented here with updated data for the 2020-2021 harvest.

This approach maintains that the agro-industrial regions of Mexico are truly multi-ethnic and multilingual regions due to the contributions of indigenous and mestizo labor—national and Central American—to the sugar labor market. These are workgroups and families that, given the high demand for cane cutters, arrive at destinations throughout the sugar-growing regions. The Mexican Southeast stands out for the complexity of confluences of internal indigenous immigration and ethnic groups from Guatemala and Belize. These broad regional contexts are characterized by historical processes of colonization and ethnic neo-colonization, plus the settlement of nationals and foreigners in an age-old territorial base of the Mayan population.

This mobility experience of harvest groups connects hundreds of rural towns on the southern Mexican border with other Guatemalan and Belizean towns through migratory routes imposed by the annual labor demand and with historical-generational incorporation of the so-called agricultural day laborers. For the Mesoamerican region, coffee is the best-known example, and it exceeds the demand for sugarcane workers by thousands. In the sugar agro-industry, labor migration is part of a complex

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<sup>1</sup> Two came from sectoral funds of the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (Conacyt), one in conjunction with the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (Sedesol) ending in 2016, and another with the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (Inmujeres) ending in 2020. A third came from the 2016-2017 Sabbatical Program.

connectivity system throughout the national territory, which has been documented since 2009. Current labor migration is of social and economic significance for thousands of indigenous families, where women stand out as economic agents (García Ortega, 2021).

When examining the mobility experience of women and men workers in the primary sector in the Mexico-Belize-Guatemala circuit, it is evident that their cultural wealth identifies their places of origin. In contrast, the social space of labor destinations (at micro, meso, and macro scales) is part of the confluence of mobilities and settlements and equally of cultural diversity. Immigrants from Mexico, Central America, South America, and other continents coexist on the southern border. The above is illustrated by the statistical examples of the 2020 Census by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (Inegi, 2020a), that locate the “birthplace” of the population living in Quintana Roo and Chiapas. This study integrates fieldwork research results with data collected and updated from the rest of the country; it highlights the socio-demographic profile of agricultural labor migrant groups focused on internal migration and cross-border mobility.

This research adheres to a broad field of studies on the specific weight of Mexico’s southern border as a labor attraction for Central America and the national labor force. In this case, the southeastern region is defined as the group of sugar mills located in the states bordering Guatemala and Belize, according to the agro-industrial regionalization in Mexico.<sup>2</sup> The topic has been absent in the specialized literature, especially regarding agricultural labor migration in this part of the country.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand the particular topic of ethnicity, this work presents a general approach to the demographic make-up of the three countries in question, their cultural diversity, and that of the states bordering Central America. Recent statistics and information gathered in fieldwork are referred to in order to exhibit the multi-ethnic and international borders at the regional level and from labor destinations. The premise is that contemporary cultural diversity in the sugar agro-industrial context in southern Mexico is due to populations of native ethnic groups and mestizo nationals, whose peoples embody their local histories and a particular tradition of mobility. Furthermore, indigenous harvesting groups and working women and men of other Central American nationalities have already integrated into Mexican or cross-border communities within the framework of a temporary labor market.

To this end, the particularities of the agro-industrial labor market in the southeast are presented. The relevance of the agro-industrial labor market on the borders with Central America is demonstrated by highlighting the dynamics of the cross-border

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<sup>2</sup> There are seven sugarcane producing regions in Mexico: Northwest, Northeast, Central, Papaloapan-Gulf, Cordoba-Gulf, and Southeast.

<sup>3</sup> There are some theses on the sugarcane regions in question: Santos Argüelles (2014) addresses the study of family integration in Mexican-Guatemalan communities into sugarcane production throughout the phenological cycle in the La Joya region and in a chapter of the book synthesizes his study on ethnicity (Santos Argüelles & García Ortega, 2015); Palacio Andrade (2012) proposes an appropriate architectural prototype for the temporary stays of harvesting groups in the Rio Hondo region, based on a hectare with private spaces for families and groups of single cutters, and criticizes the conditions of marginalization of the *galeras*. On the sugar mills of Chiapas, Wilson González (2012) deals with the topic of adolescents in the harvesting groups of Guatemala in the region of Huixtla and Soledad López (2018) carries out her study in Pujilic by comparing peasant strategies within the self-consumption and community solidarity system, and within that of the sugar industry. All these works contribute to the general idea of the precarious system of sugarcane cutting.

sugar harvest. The two categorical examples are the sugar zones of Río Hondo, in the municipality of Othón P. Blanco in Quintana Roo and its links with Belize, and that of Soconusco in the municipality of Huixtla in Chiapas and its relations with Guatemala. Connectivity and labor mobility, origins and destinations of workers, the complexity of population dynamics on the southern border, and its relationship with Central America and the Caribbean are described to locate the regional background of rural colonization and neo-colonization processes. The first refers to the original settlements resulting from the agrarian reform and the creation of ejidos. The second establishes the experience of reterritorialization of peasant groups that obtained land through purchase or other types of agrarian administrative arrangements by state and federal authorities.

Several sources support the topic of multi-ethnic agro-industrial regions in southern Mexico. The quantitative<sup>4</sup> and qualitative sources are primarily proprietary,<sup>5</sup> together with workers' participation. Of these indicators, the most significant are those on labor and social vulnerability<sup>6</sup>, which considered the dimensions of labor precariousness, access to social rights and spatial exclusion, as well as socioeconomic gender indicators in a particular study on female labor participation in the sugar agro-industry.

In addition, various agents in the sugar product system were interviewed, including producers, engineers, and managers of sugar companies, machinists, *cabos* (intermediaries between agricultural workers and producers), and public servants in the sector. An invaluable source is the three forums organized by the present author with workers employed in the sugarcane harvest.<sup>7</sup>

This proposal focuses on the socio-demographic profile of Mexican, Belizean, and Guatemalan ethnic groups, and particularly on mobility processes. It examines the type of incorporation into this labor market, notorious for the prevailing conditions of labor precariousness, the absence of rights, and the lack of institutional and business attention.<sup>8</sup> The purpose is to raise awareness of precarious working conditions, which qualify in the indicators on forced labor at the global level. Thus, it aims to guide, from the perspective of intersectionality, some public policy recommendations on cultural, migratory, and gender issues.

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<sup>4</sup> Two surveys of the aforementioned Conacyt-Sedesol and Conacyt-Inmujeres projects.

<sup>5</sup> Some are official as structural references, but to date there is still a great lack of knowledge about the number of people employed for harvesting groups, families, routes, and demographic and labor profiles. This is understandable since the population is highly volatile; the current register should be kept on a daily basis. On the other hand, international interest in this sector and in coffee has recently attracted the intervention of international civil organizations, the United Nations, and the National Human Rights Commission.

<sup>6</sup> In this case, the notion of labor and social vulnerability included the following indicators: labor precariousness, access to social rights (health, education, and food), and spatial exclusion (related to the condition of temporary settlements, the *galeras*). The construction of the vulnerability of agricultural day laborers has been defined institutionally and academically, the former as a function of the pragmatism of the public agenda and the latter related to the precariousness of working conditions.

<sup>7</sup> They were held in Xalapa, Veracruz (2012 and 2018), and in Chetumal, Quintana Roo (2019).

<sup>8</sup> From this consideration this work excludes some business groups that include in their organizational chart the work of social workers in charge of attending to the needs of the harvesting groups, especially migrants: they identify documents, count cutters, and families, support in the process of affiliation to the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, attend to the smallest detail of some cases; above all they are the operators of the Zero Tolerance Program to eradicate child labor. These groups are Grupo Beta San Miguel, Grupo Azucarero de México, Ingenio de Puga, and S. A. de C. V., among others. The subject is too broad to be covered in this text.

Various metaphors are used to describe the complex reality of human mobility in Mexico, the most common of which is the image of a “global laboratory of migrations”. This characterization scrutinizes the great scenario of confluences of historical and emerging mobilities, where there are ruptures and continuities, broad internal mobility processes, classic origin-destination bidirectionality, and the formless geometry of migratory routes of incessant transit. Such connectivity is recreated at each territorial intersection, which broadens the scales of the migratory experience and multiplies them within geopolitical migratory currents and systems: South-South, South-North, and North-South.

The aim is that the results presented here will add to the necessary decentralization of Chiapas as a border point. Other works have defined this as the “deschiapanización” of the southern border, which means no longer seeing the border between Chiapas and Guatemala as a synonym for the southern border due to the importance of migrations in transit and the media focus on the caravans. Other perspectives see this context, for some time now, as “borders in the global *souths*”, that is to say, there is no southern border in Mexico. Finally, there are sections with suggestions for the public agenda of the agro-industrial sugar sector, in favor of a tripartite orientation that includes the governments of the three countries, sugar companies, organizations of producers, agricultural working groups of sugarcane cutters, and their families.

The topics are addressed in the following sections: a) “Labor, cultural and demographic bonuses” raises the recognition of the socio-cultural contributions of workers and their families beyond the supply of labor; b) “An agro-industrial southeast” explains the national sectoral context and the specificity of the southeast region; finally, c) “Cross-border harvest” approaches the ethnographic situations of labor dynamics and exchanges, specifically on the border between Mexico and Belize. The conclusions raise debates about rethinking the South-South geopolitical relationship in labor migrations and the complexity of the connections between internal and international or cross-border mobility. Finally, this work adds a call for state and private sector intervention to recognize the contributions of indigenous workers, their families, and communities in Mexico, Belize, and Guatemala, with some public policy recommendations.

## Labor, cultural and demographic bonuses

Mexico is an important labor market in Central America; the border states of Chiapas and Quintana Roo are bordering Guatemala and Belize, respectively.<sup>9</sup> These regions are home to a complex agricultural and service geography, which activates the labor force in southern Mexico within very similar economies or labor markets. In Chiapas, the agricultural sector prevails, while in Quintana Roo, the service sector, characterized by tourism, dominates. The most long-standing similarity is found in

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<sup>9</sup> In reality, there are four states with international borders, Campeche, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, and Tabasco. The first and the last are the narrowest, but no less important, as in the case of Tenosique in Tabasco, a point that has become an important node of irregular migration. However, in a more comprehensive vision, the border of southern Mexico with the central Caribbean region would involve Yucatán and the connections of migratory networks with the archipelago and coasts of South America in the Atlantic, also very useful to the Riviera Maya in Quintana Roo.

the plantation economies, sugar, and coffee, both large labor-demanding industries. There are experienced sugarcane and coffee cutters in all three countries, since in Mexico, as in Guatemala and Belize,<sup>10</sup> both crops are produced.

Some Mexican sugarcane cutters are also coffee producers or harvesters; in Belize, sugarcane labor prevails. This pluriactive condition of working two jobs simultaneously in the cane and cherry harvests is exercised by agricultural workers in Veracruz. However, their mobility in cane cutting stands out more than in coffee cutting. On the other hand, the harvests of these crops coincide with the December-February production boom. The production of sugar and coffee is a mainstay for export, both in Belize and Guatemala. In contrast, the valuable sugar production is mainly consumed in the domestic market for the Mexican economy, while coffee is exported.

Another great similarity is the cultural diversity in these fringes of the global South, not only because of their multi-ethnic condition anchored in the native peoples of the respective countries but also because of the multicultural stamp of the presence of workers from various origins. Lately, these presences have been bolstered by a variety of nationalities (even from other parts of the continent) due to the importance of Mexico's southern border as a connection to the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Within the evolution of Mexican agriculture and agro-industry, labor migration is a constituent part of the formation of new territories and multiple socio-demographic processes. In the case of the sugar agro-industry on the southern border, sugarcane cultivation was promoted by the Mexican state in association with agrarian colonization in the run-up to the liberalization of land sales.<sup>12</sup> Within this framework, the attraction of indigenous labor promotes other demographic processes, such as the formation of settlements in the labor destination and subsequent displacements from these new origins.<sup>13</sup> These processes make the ethnic map more complex since they diversify population mobility within and outside Mexico.<sup>14</sup> However, the experience of the forced displacement of communities and entire families, the Guatemalan exodus to

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<sup>10</sup> The Orange Walk and Cayo districts are the main producers of coffee.

<sup>11</sup> Reference is made to the Central American migrant caravans, present since 2018, and even in 2021, the date of preparation of this document. From experience, it is possible to point out that at the southern and northern borders migrants involved in these exoduses have been incorporated into itinerant self-employment and temporary employment in various urban economic sectors, such as in Tapachula and Tijuana. It is especially common to see the population of Haitian origin setting up in parks and small businesses (restaurants, glass shops, blacksmith shops, mechanic shops, gas stations, etc.). This observation could seem prejudiced, but it is not, due to the phenotypical recognition of the Afro-descendant Antillean population in these border city settings. The Central American characteristics are more similar to the Mexican; at traffic lights, several of these migrants approach drivers to sell some candy or product. They are recognized because they identify themselves as migrants, even visibly carrying their identity cards or bearing a flag of a Central American country on their backs.

<sup>12</sup> This process was realized with the reform of Article 27 of the Constitution in 1992, in which land holders (usufructuaries in ejidos and communities) became owners in order to be able to sell their land in view of the common practice of such transactions outside the law. A subsequent process had to do with the formalization and security (certification) of land tenure and to give certainty to purchase and sale agreements, among other things.

<sup>13</sup> This type of process has been documented in intensive agricultural systems under the name of "migratory linkages". See Lara Flores (2011).

<sup>14</sup> On the transnational scale, cases of Mixtecs, Otomi, or Nahuatl have been documented in the United States (see Fox & Rivera-Salgado, 2004; García Ortega, 2008; Quezada Ramírez, 2018; among others. For Canada, refer to Castracani, 2018).



Mexico, Belize, Canada, and the United States in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is also very relevant.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Mexico, the integration of Guatemalan people has been documented in the states of Chiapas (Ruíz Lagier, 2013), Campeche, and Quintana Roo, where they have formed Mexican-Guatemalan communities (Santos Argüelles & García Ortega, 2015; Chan & García, 2018). Part of the integration process entailed job training, excavation and archaeological maintenance work, and sugar cane cutting. According to the interviews carried out in these localities, these work experiences are part of the memory of the refugee experience.

The Mexico-Belize border has several origins. One is the agrarian distribution, since the 1940s, for peasants from various parts of the interior of the country and taken advantage of by others from the north of Belize. Very young families arrived there, pioneer couples, who opened up the jungle for agricultural production. However, the attempt discouraged many, and they abandoned the jungle lands. In 1992, when the Mexican agrarian distribution was canceled, the area known as Rio Hondo<sup>16</sup> had already incorporated the Central American population. In addition to the Belizean population with family ties, some came from the Guatemalan or Salvadoran refugee exodus in Belizean territory, especially the descendants of the generation of the 1980s,<sup>17</sup> who were fleeing fratricidal wars.

Currently, the demographic change in this region is driven by the settlement of people from all parts of the country, related to the employment opportunities of the sugar mill, and of new immigrants from Central America who have found refuge there. One mechanism of this diversity has been the mixed marriages of native men and women, who work in the tourist areas of the Riviera Maya and other parts of Quintana Roo. This state has the highest population growth rate (3.5%) at the national level, mostly concentrated in the municipalities of Solidaridad and Tulum (Inegi, 2020a) due to the employment opportunities of tourist developments.

According to data from the 2020 Population and Housing Census (Inegi, 2020a), the states bordering the Central Caribbean region show contrasting trends. Quintana Roo maintains internal immigration on the rise with almost half of the total state population (more than 945 000 “born in another state”) and reception of foreigners (less than 40 000 “born in another country”). Chiapas sustains the growth of international immigration with more than 60 000 foreigners<sup>18</sup> and less than 200 000

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<sup>15</sup> The literature on the Guatemalan exodus is extensive and the refugee processes have been documented for Central and North America. For this topic, see Le Bot (1995), Ferris (1984), Woods et al. (1997), Bissett (1987), among others.

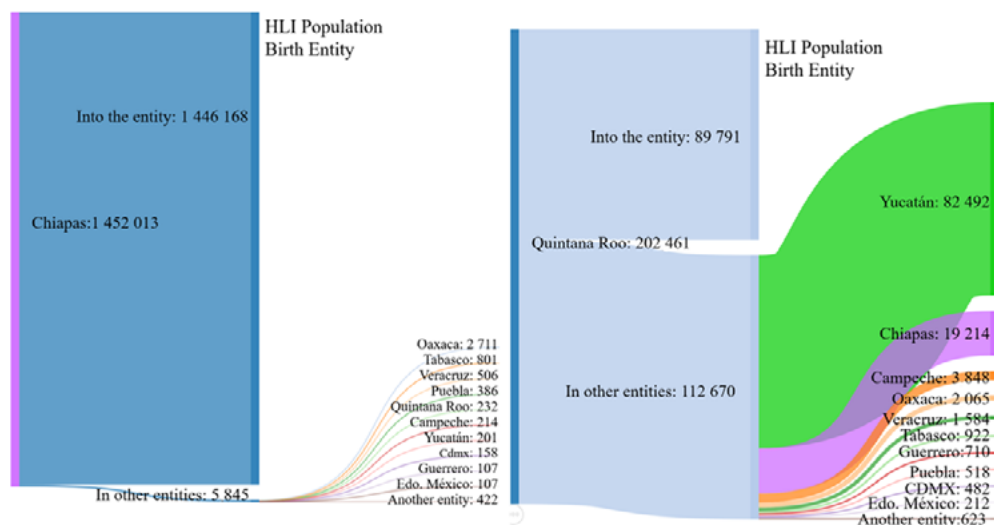
<sup>16</sup> This natural border measures 193 km on continental land and flows into the Caribbean; the international maritime limit is 85 km from Chetumal Bay. The Hondo River is the product of a confluence of waters coming from the mountains of Guatemala. In Belize it is known as Blue Creek and Rio Bravo. At the border there is an international bridge, “Subteniente Lopez”, with border control communication infrastructure. In this area, informal crossing is common along the entire border.

<sup>17</sup> The presence of the Central American population in Chiapas, in other states of the southern border, and throughout Mexican territory is notable in terms of their permanence at the individual, family, or group level, characterized by the need to have the corresponding migratory documents. Among these groups there are people who have made family, work, and social life, and are integrated into regional life (García Ortega, 2013); this situation has been documented for ten years with the accompaniment of migration regularization processes of Central Americans in the Rio Hondo region.

<sup>18</sup> Between 2000 and 2020, Chiapas has tripled its foreign population (3.5 times more) and Quintana Roo quintupled it (five times more).

immigrants from the rest of the country. Campeche, Tabasco, and Yucatán display much lower levels of these variables. However, indigenous language speakers within national and international immigration processes are eloquent in all these states, contributing to the multicultural imprint. However, this article focuses on Chiapas and Quintana Roo as the specific contexts of the study regions and reflects the population diversity. Figure 1 presents the census variable of the place of birth of indigenous language speakers for the states mentioned above.

**Figure 1. Speakers of indigenous languages (*hablantes de lengua indígena, HLI*) in Chiapas and Quintana Roo**



Source: created by the author with data from Inegi, 2020a

As for Belize, the Central American presence has turned it into an increasingly Latin American enclave, concentrated in certain districts. In 2021, Belizean official data reported 427 848 inhabitants at the national level. The foreign-born totaled 64 528 inhabitants, representing 15% of the total. Of those born in another country, 37% were from Guatemala and 18% from Honduras (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2021). The rest of the non-native people are distributed among nationalities such as El Salvador, the United States, Mexico, China, Canada, and India.

Such heterogeneity is even greater when noting the use of several languages, the presence of diverse religious affiliations, and the formation of mixed marriages. The latter is an increasingly common practice even among Mennonites, deeply rooted in endogamy, although these marriages are rare. This “Latinization of Belize” has led the young country to “designate a second official language” since 57% of the population speaks Spanish. Other studies have pointed out the silent incorporation of Central American labor. The Belizean census data cited above recorded eight ethnic categories: mestizo, Creole (the largest ethnic group), Mayan, and Garifuna (recognized as Belizean indigenous peoples), plus West Indians (historically from



Jamaica), Mennonites, and Latinos. People from Taiwan and China are integrated into this melting pot, as people invited to settle.

The presence of the Mennonite groups that settled the Belizean border in the late 1950s is noteworthy. To date, they continue to expand with almost half a dozen settlements in the districts of Orange Walk and Corozal (both border jurisdictions with Mexico).<sup>19</sup> By then, the South of Mexico was experiencing settlement processes in Quintana Roo, induced by the agrarian distribution, of which the last land delivery processes took place in the 1970s.<sup>20</sup> This opened the agricultural path for the new peasant families. Practically, cross-border relations were built based on exchanges and solidarity, according to comments on both sides. As the Mennonite colonies developed in northern Belize, Mexican and Central American labor was hired, as well as their own labor force in the service of urban, communication, and agricultural enterprises in Belize.

On the other hand, in Guatemala, the 2018 population census counted just over 16 000 000 inhabitants nationwide, while official projections for 2021 calculated 17 000 000. Their records consider the following categories for demographic diversity: Ladino<sup>21</sup> (56%), Xinka (2%), Afro-descendants, Creoles, Afromestizos, Garifunas, and foreigners, with less than 1% for each group. In terms of ethnic composition, speakers of one of the twenty-two Mayan mother tongues account for 41% of the total population. Of this population, 30% is located in the three departments bordering Mexico, San Marcos, Huehuetenango, and El Petén. In Quiché, Alta Verapaz, Sololá, Totonicapán, and Chimaltenango, the majority of the population (between 75% and 100%) self-identify as Mayan (Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2018).

The Mexican spectrum is revealed by the 2020 census, which recognizes sixty-eight native languages throughout the country and 7 364 645 HLI.<sup>22</sup> In the southeastern states, the number of speakers of indigenous languages is 2 372 515 (Table 1). The census locates speakers of an indigenous language outside their traditional territories. This trend has been registered for more than half a century due to the historical background of their forced displacement since colonial times. According to 2020 records, Chiapas has the largest number of speakers of an indigenous language in the border states, followed by Yucatan and Quintana Roo. Campeche and Tabasco have lower percentages.

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<sup>19</sup> Mennonite settlements in Belizean regions, Orange Walk and Corozal districts, are older than those in southern Mexico (located in Campeche and Quintana Roo, at different distances and times from Belize). For both cases it is an important root of the pioneers coming from the north of Mexico, from where they arrived a century ago. The experience of transnational and internal mobility of these groups is *sui generis* compared to the migrations of the areas studied here and in the history of global migrations, since they have been scattered throughout the world for more than half a millennium. According to field data, the location of new colonies in the Mennonite hinterland occurs at the same time as transnational projects, as is the case with the current settlement project in Peru from this part of Mexico.

<sup>20</sup> The last stage of settlement in Mexico began in 1958. Some peasant groups came from Puebla, Michoacán, Aguascalientes, Coahuila, and Tlaxcala and were incorporated into the settlement of the states of Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Chiapas (Mendoza Ramírez, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> The Guatemalan census questionnaire presents a list of ethnic categories where the socio-cultural ascription (if the person considers himself/herself...) is selected. "Ladino" is the term designated for the mestizo population and its use is common.

<sup>22</sup> Historically, language has been the main indicator to define an indigenous identity. Since the 2000 census in Mexico, cultural belonging has been asked (see Vázquez Sandrín, & Quezada, 2015).

**Table 1. HLI population in the southeast of Mexico**

Population	National	Campeche	Chiapas	Quintana Roo	Tabasco	Yucatán
Three years and older	119 976 584	878 528	5 181 929	1 752 570	2 283 383	2 215 931
Indigenous language speaker	7 3t64 645	91 801	1 459 648	204 949	91 025	525 092

Source: created by the author with data from Inegi, 2020a

Indigenous cartographies have become more complex, with diversified labor markets in all economic sectors for a large national and international population. There are few records of indigenous speakers of northern groups within the southeastern Mexican border orbit, e.g., Matlatzinca, Chichimeco, Jonaz, Pame, Oluteco, Mazahua, Otomí, Huasteco, Yaqui, Cora, Mayo, Kipapoo, Guarijío, Kumiai, or Tarahumara. The states in question account for 32% of the national total (Table 2).<sup>23</sup>

**Table 2. Indigenous households in southeastern Mexico**

<b>National</b>	<b>11 800 247</b>
Campeche	182 867
Chiapas	1 835 102
Quintana Roo	423 166
Tabasco	155 175
Yucatán	983 257
Total	3 579 567

Source: created by the author with data from Inegi, 2020a

This summary of similarities and differences between the Mexican borders with Belize and Guatemala highlights the framework of cultural diversity and the multi-ethnic presence in the sugar agro-industry. This condition is due to the native population, labor, selective, or refugee immigrants and their cross-border dynamics in the Belize-Guatemala-Mexico triangle. This situation contextualizes another strategic labor node in Mesoamerica, where Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama have stood out regionally, in addition to the well-known temporary incursions of cross-border agricultural workers in the countries of the American isthmus (Buonomo Zabaleta, 2013). In general, the markets for this labor force are characterized as temporary, informal, flexible, and cross-border in agriculture. This context makes it possible to situate the rich and historical experience of the work groups in the Mexican sugarcane harvest and recognize the traditional contribution of the Central American labor force in southern Mexico.

Following this analysis, the demographic bonus transcends the classic definitions related to the change in the population structure adjusted to various variables such as

<sup>23</sup> Population in census households where the reference person (generally the head of household), their spouse, mother, father, or parent-in-law speaks an indigenous language.

fertility, economic dependence, and others. It concentrates on the identification of the population in productive ages.<sup>24</sup> Regarding this last condition, this work proposes that the contribution of the migrant labor force is more than a demographic bonus. It is also an economic and cultural bonus in terms of the value of the work skills and the contribution of people to the regional economy, and the support of families that travel to the work destination or stay in the place of origin. For decades, the trade has been passed down from generation to generation, which has created a labor specialty in the communities that supply labor for agribusiness. Within this background, communities contribute their knowledge and experience as sugarcane cutters. In these “sugarcane villages”, they have a catalog of community practices of family and contractual arrangements associated with the departure of harvesting groups to cut sugarcane. Without these social supports, labor mobility would be impossible.

### An agro-industrial southeast

Sugarcane is the only crop in Mexico with a legal framework that declares planting, cultivation, harvesting, and industrialization to be of public interest. The *Ley de Desarrollo Sustentable de la Caña de Azúcar* created two significant bodies, the Producción y Calidad Cañera committees and the Comité Nacional para el Desarrollo Sustentable de la Caña de Azúcar (Conadesuca). The former is vital in agricultural planning, cultivation, and industrialization. The sugar production supply chain involves an entire structure (the production program and other derivatives) made up of two strategic areas, the fields and the factories, with their organizational, productive, social, financial, and administrative divisions.

Mexican sugar production is active in fifteen states and has more than fifty sugar mills.<sup>25</sup> The state of Veracruz (on the Gulf of Mexico) owns nearly half of the factories, followed by Jalisco, San Luis Potosí, Oaxaca, and Tamaulipas. At the national level, the sector generates 500 000 direct jobs with the participation of 182 389 sugarcane producers;<sup>26</sup> it uses more than 150 000 agricultural workers in general. In the phenological cycle of the crop, there are about 70 000 cane cutters.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See, among others, Hernández López et al., 2013.

<sup>25</sup> The total number may vary according to each harvest, or if a mill stops operating or closes, as in the case of Azsuremex in Tenosique, Tabasco.

<sup>26</sup> In Mexico, sugarcane cultivation for sugar production is carried out under the contract farming system. In the list of suppliers of raw material for the mills, women producers do not reach 50%, according to the field records of this study. On the other hand, during the creation of this study using data from the Programa de Producción para el Bienestar del Cultivo de la Caña de Azúcar, women beneficiaries were 35% of the national total (133 027 people with subsidies) for the autumn-winter 2020 and spring-summer 2021 cycles. The national total of producers who use their crop for sugar production is 176 439 (Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Sustentable y la Soberanía Alimentaria [CEDRSSA], 2019). In this research on female labor incorporation in agribusiness, the lack of productive statistics disaggregated by gender was noted. In fact, following the dissemination of the aforementioned study, action on the matter has been taken by collaborating with official and business entities and social organizations to document the labor participation of women and to have indicators with a gender perspective.

<sup>27</sup> The study by García Ortega (2021) states that the participation of women as sugarcane cutters is low. However, a group of women sugarcane planters was found in Campeche; these agricultural workers will be discussed below.

An estimate by the International Labor Organization (Organización Internacional del Trabajo [OIT], 2016) counted 60 000 foreign cutters. The presence of sugarcane cutters from Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras was documented in studies by the present author (García Ortega, 2014), which is not found in official analyses of agricultural day laborers nor in sectoral-business data or in migration agencies.<sup>28</sup> The harvesting groups are temporary and include other labor groups, such as machine and sugarcane truck operators, cane lifters (who collect the cane thrown by the machine when lifting the piles), cane tickers (in charge of counting the piles of cane accumulated by the cutters), and *estaqueros* (who place the cane on the truck that takes the raw material to the mill); these occupations reflect the dynamism of the economic spillover to the primary, manufacturing, industrial, and service sectors.<sup>29</sup>

The economic recovery is evident in the 267 municipalities, generating 2.4 million indirect jobs on a regional scale. At this stage, many opportunities are opening up for the local population and for the rest of the country and certain localities in Belize and Guatemala. In this account of what is happening on the border with Central America, it is important to highlight an invisible population, women members of harvesting groups such as cooks, laundresses and merchants, and agricultural workers (cutters and planters). A recent study documented the food distribution systems and demonstrated how the labor force of these workers subsumes an important value of the cost of reproduction of the army of cutters (García Ortega, 2021).

The southeastern region of the aforementioned national agro-industrial sugar regions includes the sugar mills in the southern border states. In addition to its economic importance, sugarcane production is supported by a socio-cultural fabric that transcends the borders of productive enclaves. At the level of the southeastern region, there are 19 523 producers (about 10% of the national total). Between the 2010-2018 cycles, the number of hectares grew (more than 130 000) in 20 municipalities; approximately three-quarters of the land is rainfed. The best-positioned producers are those from Chiapas, as most of their sugarcane plots are irrigated (Secretaría de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural [Sader] & Conadesuca, 2018).

There are two substantive links in the operation and planning of sugar and by-product production, harvest time and repair time (the technical name for the period when the sugar mill is not working: the machinery is cleaned, overhauled, and adjusted in its entirety). Depending on the milling capacity of each mill, the times vary in each region.

Harvest is the busiest period, and sugarcane regions come alive during the harvest months. In some regions highly dependent on the agro-industrial economy, their planning (productive or domestic) is often based on loans against profits, earnings, and salaries, before, during, and after the harvest, as is the case in the Pujiltic region of Chiapas.

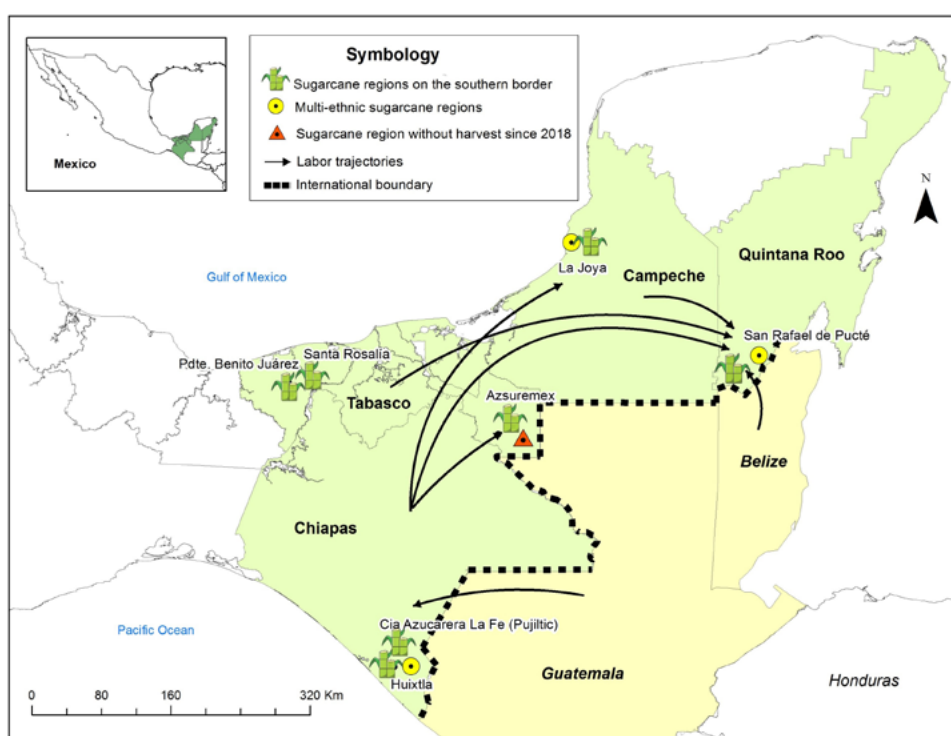
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<sup>28</sup> Data on work permits issued to Guatemalans and Belizeans are not considered in this study due to administrative and methodological biases. The database can be consulted directly online. There are practically no records of agricultural workers from Belize, while in the case of those from Guatemala, the coverage of their migration is almost total.

<sup>29</sup> This sector has been omitted from agro-industrial statistics. However, the importance of the provision of services in the commercial and preparation areas has been demonstrated, with a significant participation of women, especially as cooks (García Ortega, 2021).

The sugarcane-producing regions in the southern border states have a particular history and tradition of more than 70 years. Since the founding of the mills, the oldest is La Joya (1949), followed by Pujiltic (1958) and Santa Rosalía (1961). The rest were the mills San Rafael de Pucté (1976), Huixtla (1975), Azsuremex (1970), and Benito Juárez (1974), the last ones built in the country in the 1970s. Under the contract farming system, there are seven supply zones in the southeastern agro-industrial region, one in Campeche, two in Chiapas, one in Quintana Roo, and three in Tabasco.<sup>30</sup> As in the rest of the sugar-producing regions, this region is marked by a rich history of mobility, but the Mexico-Central America connection is its distinguishing feature. See Figure 2 for a sample of such labor movements within the zone.

Figure 2. Southeastern agro-industrial region and labor migration



Source: created by the author with field data

This vast region has just under 10 000 cane cutters, with different harvesting times in each supply zone (Table 3), because milling depends on climatic, technical, and political factors. The producers in the supply areas hire the agricultural workers; for some harvesting groups, the mills are responsible through their own technicians or

<sup>30</sup> In Tenosique, the Azsuremex, S. A. de C. V. sugar mill had its last harvest in 2018; it ceased operations due to lack of investment in infrastructure, machinery, and equipment, especially mills, boilers, and general services (Sader & Conadesuca, 2018).

engineers.<sup>31</sup> Within the generalized framework of this labor market, two subsystems of employment are recognized: local and foreign cutters, generally hired by word of mouth, and free cutters,<sup>32</sup> in a system of greater labor flexibility. This classification is in force and generalized in the regions, with local modifications in each zone, including ejido, cuadrilla, or harvesting group.

**Table 3. Labor force in sugarcane growing regions on the southern border of Mexico  
Sugarcane harvest 2020-2021**

Sugarcane regions/mills	Municipality	State	Days of work	Cutters
Impulsora Azucarera del Trópico, S. A. de C. V. La Joya	Champotón	Campeche	160 December-May	1 450
Compañía Azucarera de La Fe Pujilic	Venustiano Carranza	Chiapas	185 November-May	3 450
Ingenio Huixtla	Huixtla		165 November-May	1 000
San Rafael de Pucté	Othón P. Blanco	Quintana Roo	227 December-July	1 467
Santa Rosalía	Cárdenas	Tabasco	153 January-June	1 116
Presidente Benito Juárez			144 December-May	1 947
Azuremex*	Tenosique		—	—
Total				10 430

\* It ceased operations in 2018. Historically it has had less than 500 cane cutters on average. For the 2017-2018 cycle, it reported 246 local cutters

Source: created by the author with field data and data from the Cámara Nacional de las Industrias Azucarera y Alcohólica, 2021

In general, the labor supply is focused on the male population. However, women in this occupation participate as independent workers, i.e., they are not the “labor companions” of the cutter but independent agricultural workers. In fact, the percentage of women participants does not even reach 1% of the national total. However, it is significant among the indigenous groups of Guatemala, Chiapas, Guerrero, Nayarit, and, above all, Veracruz, with the participation of the Nahuatl natives of Zongolica (García Ortega, 2021). The occupation of planting is also not generally recognized

<sup>31</sup> They tend to be select cutting groups and are better paid.

<sup>32</sup> The “free” worker is a category that may be present in some sugar regions and is so called because they do not receive an *enganche* (advance payment or loan). Employing *enganche* agricultural workers is a current and widespread practice in labor recruitment that consists of hiring cane cutters by advancing them a payment or loan in cash; thus, the worker is de facto indebted. For this labor practice there are different arrangements between workers and contractors, and it is different in each sugarcane region.



as a labor option for women; however, there are several active groups of Guatemalan sugarcane planters in Campeche and other local women in Pujilic.

Previous research carried out by the authors has documented two socio-demographic profiles of the population involved in sugarcane cutting. The first one corresponds to sugarcane cutters and the second one to women agricultural workers who are cutters, planters, and producers.<sup>33</sup> What is common to these cutting and planting groups (male and female) is that they share the same system and working conditions with the appropriate adjustments, such as the type of piece-rate accounting; by handful, task, steps, labor, day labor, or the predominant one, which is equivalent to a ton of industrialized sugarcane. Specifically, the salary of a cane cutter is calculated based on the weight of cut cane subjected to the industrialization process, which is far from corresponding to the labor invested.<sup>34</sup>

Historically, there are sugarcane-growing regions in which the hiring of foreigners has been a constant.<sup>35</sup> In the region of interest, local labor covers the needs of the harvest, as is the case in the sugar mills of Tabasco and Pujilic, Chiapas. Thus, San Rafael de Pucté and Huixtla are the two sugarcane zones where foreign labor is hired, in addition to local labor. Meanwhile, among the ejidos of La Joya, this practice has returned since the 2018-2019 harvest.<sup>36</sup> The number of harvesting or cutting groups depends on the needs of the harvesting area; they are distributed among the sugarcane ejidos through the intermediary of the representatives of the sugarcane-producing organizations.<sup>37</sup>

The recognized agro-industrial labor market is an integral part of cross-border economies and dynamics where there are shared spaces through the exchange of knowledge, goods, symbols, and people. Of the two corners on the southern map, the Quintana Roo-Belize corner is the only one that constitutes an agro-industrial cross-border region with the operation of the San Rafael de Pucté sugar mill in Quintana Roo and Belize Sugar Industries Limited located in Orange Walk in northern Belize. The history of sugar production in Belize is closely linked to the history of the Mayan refugees persecuted by the Mexican army during the Yucatán War, a well-known and well-documented story. The emergence of sugar cane production is attributed to the Mayas who fled to the north of what was then British Honduras in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century,

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<sup>33</sup> In this case, it is only one occupational category within a broader typology that includes agricultural workers, producers, planters, and service workers, including cooks who accompany the cutting groups (García Ortega, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> This is a subject that requires further development. Suffice it to say that there are constant complaints from the harvesting groups about the types of payment, since they do not see their daily efforts reflected in them. However, this conflict does not occur in all sugarcane growing regions.

<sup>35</sup> Affecting the fragile stability of the labor force at the national level, there are other processes such as the settlement of workers who, at some point, were outsiders.

<sup>36</sup> Generally speaking, this is the predominant process. The mills do not hire cutters, and it is common for them to ignore the presence of foreign workers, but they are counted at the harvests and tend to be small groups that could return for the next harvest employed by the producers, according to data compiled by the present author.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, processes such as the outflow of labor force to the United States, Canada, or the tourist areas of the Riviera Maya are also emerging.

as it was the Mayan rebels who brought the first sugar canes. This fact is corroborated in the oral tradition in the sugar cane villages of northern Belize.<sup>38</sup>

The labor mobility of sugarcane cutter agricultural workers from Chiapas and Guatemala to the sugarcane region supplying the Huixtla mill speaks of the great tradition of participation of sugarcane cutters for more than three decades. This municipality is located in the Soconusco region, which has a broad cross-border economic, labor, and migratory influence. Here, the Guatemalan labor force in coffee and sugar converges with the specific differences of a greater concentration of agricultural workers for the cherry harvest.

Concerning Guatemalan labor in Chiapas, in the other sugar region in Pujilic, the temporary participation of Guatemalan refugees at the end of the last century is still evident. However, currently, the demand for labor in the sugar harvest is covered with local labor with some hiring of indigenous workers from the highlands of Chiapas or neighboring areas in the region of Comitán. Rather, the indigenous and non-indigenous contributions from this region, and in general from Chiapas, are destined for other areas supplying raw material for sugar in Michoacán, Colima, Veracruz, Tamaulipas, among others, according to research carried out by the present author (García Ortega, 2021), where cane cutters were also found.

Another sugar mill on the border is the one in Tenosique. The sugarcane roads are also a crossing point for irregular migrants crossing through El Ceibo coming from Central America, but especially from Honduras, a route that has been booming in the last decade.<sup>39</sup> Although Guatemalan labor migration to this area did not establish a tradition, it did exist. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, several Guatemalan crews went to cut cane hired by a Chiapanecan *enganchador*, who, using the resources at hand, hired them to cut cane<sup>40</sup> and processed the labor migration permits of the workers to go to Palenque. From this municipality on the border with Tabasco, the Guatemalan sugarcane cutters were taken to Tenosique, where they worked temporarily. In this same area, young people from Chiapas who worked temporarily with other workers living in the *galeras* with families who arrived there because of the armed conflict in 1994 were incorporated into the harvest. In the family histories of the harvests in this border area, the food provided by local women to people from various states of the country in what seemed to be a past period of abundance for the sugar cane harvest in Tenosique is recounted.

A separate case is the La Joya sugar mill in Campeche since practically all the labor force is local. However, almost half is of Guatemalan origin, among whom are Mam, Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchí', K'iche,' and Chuj speakers. This labor force contribution corresponds to the historical fact of the integration of the refugee population in

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<sup>38</sup> To this should be added the fact that the extension of the sugarcane agro-industrial frontier was one of the pivots that triggered the war in Yucatán in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, after the independence of Mexico, due to the new dispossession of Mayan lands and the incorporation of landless peasants into the peonage in the plantations (Avilez Tax, 2014, among others).

<sup>39</sup> During the fieldwork in this sugar region, it was a daily occurrence to meet groups of young migrants. The research team supported them with food and accompaniment to the Casa del Migrante La 72, which is at the entrance to Tenosique; in general, they refused the help of a doctor, citing their fear of deportation. In the local oral tradition, their temporary passage in sugarcane cutting is conveyed.

<sup>40</sup> At that time, only agricultural work permits were being processed from Guatemala to Chiapas.

Mexico at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>41</sup> By now, these communities have changed their socio-demographic profile, which is why they are called Mexican-Guatemalan. Specifically, the community of Santo Domingo Kesté—located in the municipality of Champotón and in the vicinity of the sugar mill supply zone—is the one that has the strongest relationship with sugar production due to its early incorporation into the work with the crop and its gradual integration as producers of the crop.

However, studies on the participation of women in the sugar agro-industry have documented a group of sugarcane planters and cutters in this same locality and Hobomó, a town almost two hours away from the La Joya sugar mill facilities and closer to the state capital (García Ortega, 2021). This last locality has the smallest population of all those created after the Guatemalan exodus to Campeche. The incorporation of women into the agricultural work with this crop also occurs with other groups of sugarcane planters in the mestizo town of El Porvenir, near the La Joya sugar mill.

In an approximation to the population diversity of the study regions, the basic data of the municipalities in question are presented in the understanding that this is the municipal context registered in the 2020 census and that it serves as a sieve for the multi-ethnic composition of the temporary presence of agricultural workers (Table 4). Meanwhile, to have a general overview at the state level of labor incorporation, the data of interest on the agricultural sector are presented (Table 5). Information on the indigenous labor force is also included (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

**Table 4. Population diversity by place of birth at the municipal level**

Population	Othón P. Blanco		Huixtla	
	Total	%	Total	%
Total by state	233 648	100	53 242	100
Born in the state	151 989	65	50 026	94
Born in another state	78 047	33	1 833	3
Born in another country	3 076	1	1 374	3

Source: created by the author based on data from the Censo de Población y Vivienda (Inegi, 2020a)

**Table 5. Population employed in the primary sector at the state level**

Financial sector	Quintana Roo		Chiapas	
	Total	%	Total	%
Total	895 458	100	2 044 606	100
Primary sector	49 614	6	659 226	32

Source: created by the author with data from the Encuesta Nacional de Ocupación y Empleo. First quarter of 2020 (Inegi, 2020b)

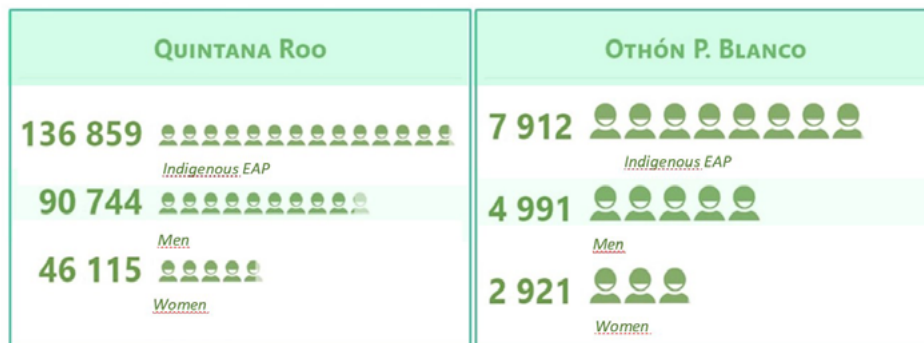
<sup>41</sup> The integration of refugees in the 1980s began in Chiapas, from where they were distributed to the neighboring states of Quintana Roo and Campeche. On refugees and integration, refer to Ruiz Lagier, 2013, among others.

**Figure 3. Economically active population (EAP), HLI, in Huixtla, Chiapas**



Source: created by the author with data from the Population and Housing Census (Inegi, 2020a)

**Figure 4. Economically active population (EAP), HLI, in Othón P. Blanco, Quintana Roo**



Source: created by the author with data from the Censo de Población y Vivienda (Inegi, 2020a)

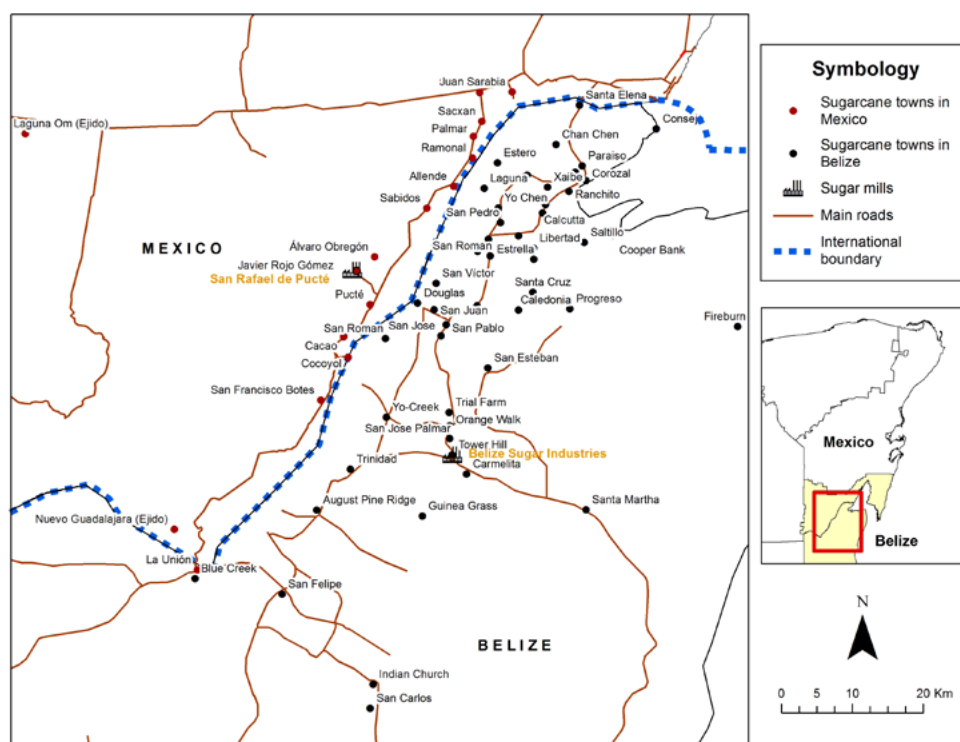
### Cross-border harvest

The planning of the sugar harvest at the national level depends on the organization between the management of the mills and the local representatives of producers and ejidos in the more than 50 raw material supply zones. As mentioned above, Mexico and Belize form a large cross-border sugar region with different histories, the oldest of which is that of Belize. On both sides of the border, there are sugarcane villages and ejidos. The localities are very similar in their distribution, landscape, and rural architecture; they are mirror communities. This concept was coined from geography to refer to “mirror cities”. The concept is useful for analyzing places whose geopolitical structure refers to a territorial formation with international administrative limits and

whose location obeys socio-spatial dynamics immersed in shared historical processes (past or present) and in constant change.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, the localities distributed along the natural border of the Hondo River and those of northern Belize share a broad agro-industrial region with peasant roots that have evolved territorially through the processes of colonization and neo-colonization on both sides (Figure 5). The exchanges result in an amalgamation of intertwined family and work histories of Yucatecan, Mayan, Mennonite, Caribbean, Mexican, and Central American origins, in addition to religious and linguistic plurality and the proliferation of mixed marriages. At present, the Maya are to be found mostly in Yucatán, followed by Quintana Roo. On the other hand, this ethnic category exists in the census classification of Belize.

Figure 5. Mexico-Belize cross-border agroindustrial region



Source: created by the author with field data, Sistema de Información Agroalimentaria y Pesquera and Sugar Industry Research & Development Institute

<sup>42</sup> With this concept, a broader reflection from the perspective of cultural geography is addressed, based on the construction of ethnic diversity and border identity, as has been established for demographic, cultural, and economic bonds, and which serves to talk about the multi-ethnic borders in the agro-industrial regions in the southeast. Therefore, it echoes the critique of the premise that establishes “excessive classification rhetoric” in defining “mirror cities” only by proximity, as in the case of cities in northern Mexico with those in the southern United States (García Amaral, 2007). In another analysis, this concept analyzes processes of complementarity (Reyes Posadas et al., 2001), which is more in line with the cross-border issue raised.

Of the sugar regions on the southern border, San Rafael de Pucté has the greatest diversity of origins (indigenous and non-indigenous, and other nationalities).<sup>43</sup> This border brings together all of Mexico and Central America. It is important to remember that people who arrived from various parts of central and northern Mexico have populated these lands since the mid-twentieth century. The above later included Mennonite groups in their migratory triangulation north of Mexico-north of Belize-south of Mexico. Furthermore, during those same years, people from Puebla, Campeche, Yucatan, Tabasco, and Veracruz arrived in northern Belize, creating families with Belizeans, and settling in the sugarcane towns.

In the *galeras* where the foreign cane cutters settle in San Rafael de Pucté, one can hear a variety of languages and perceive an indescribable mixture of smells from the culinary essences of the dozens of stoves combined with the identifiable smoke of burning firewood. In a decade, groups of cutters from Belize, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Veracruz, and the rest of Quintana Roo have stayed in the same lodges, as in the ejido of Cacao. Most of them ignore each other and even dispute the tight spaces available. Younger cutters tend to get together to chat or go for a walk. Among the Belizeans employed as cutters, some are trilingual, communicating in English, Spanish, Mayan, or Creole. Their personal loudspeakers play the latest songs in the genres of *gruperas*, *rancheras*, and *punta*.<sup>44</sup> Workers do what they can to organize and clean their spaces, taking measures to safeguard their meager belongings.

Belizean border cutters calculate harvesting times for employment. Mexican cane cutters are occasionally found in the Belizean sugarcane harvest, involving agricultural workers of ethnic origin from Guatemala and other Central Americans, both settled and seasonal labor. Thus, the harvest in Mexico happens earlier than in Belize, so there is room to combine work on both sides. Other important approaches are payment for the work, careful selection of the ejidos to go to cut due to the networks in which to insert oneself with fewer disadvantages, such as knowledge of the local dynamics and the usual guests of the *galeras*, access to support from contractors and producers, as well as having family or friendship ties. Of course, the proximity and ease of transportation from the Belizean villages to Río Hondo is important because this tributary is navigable by canoes or boats (depending on the place of passage). With this facility, weekends are used to come and go and even to take Mexican cutter friends on a trip to the other side of the river.

The same is practiced by those from Chiapas who, due to the ease of transportation in rented vans (vehicles with more than five seats), can come and go every week. After all, they only go to the municipalities of northern Chiapas: Palenque, Ocosingo, Chilón or Sitalá. The harvest groups are mainly of Tzeltal and Chol origin. Guest workers of Mam, Chuj, Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, and Chontal origin are added to these *galeras* from Quintana Roo; others are speakers of English, the official language in Belize. People and families have lived in *galeras*, made for temporary stays, for decades. In reality, the population is floating, although, in the ejidos where there are *galeras*, the settlement of these workers is becoming more and more noticeable. One of the major issues in this region is the irregular status of Central Americans

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<sup>43</sup> As noted above, Central American cutters, except for Belizeans, already live and work in the cross-border region without documents.

<sup>44</sup> For some musical references consult Spotify or Youtube platforms.



in the cross-border region, and the lack of documents of Mexican families who, for myriad reasons, lack identity at adulthood, and who pass on to their offspring the same problem so that dozens of children have not had access to the right to identity or to school or governmental support.

On the other border with Guatemala, in the vast Soconusco region within the supply zone of the Huixtla sugar mill, the facilities for the cutters from Guatemala are filled with families and groups of cutters. There, the incorporation of Guatemalan cutters into the Chiapas harvest takes place in a mixed form, with groups of young people and others coming with families.<sup>45</sup> Recently they reported having female sugarcane cutters in the 2019-2020 sugarcane harvest. The presence of female workers extends to cooks and shopkeepers<sup>46</sup> who accompany the harvest groups coming from Suchitepéquez, Huehuetenango, Quetzaltenango, and San Marcos. Some Guatemalan cooks already settled in Huixtla are recruited in the work groups that go to Michoacán or Tamaulipas. Historically, the number of Guatemalan workers has averaged more than 800 cutters. Young people make up the bulk of the labor force and include minors, which has resulted in fines for producers who hire cutters.<sup>47</sup>

The ethnic roots are visible in the *galeras* through the women's clothing who blow the stove in the improvised outdoor kitchens. There, at the door of the temporary rooms, the figures of the women stand out because of their colored fabrics<sup>48</sup>—self-made—and the variety of designs of the blouses they wear tied with a sash. Some of them let their imagination run wild at the backstrap loom when there is enough time to make progress on the family garments, while at the same time they take care of the *patojos* and *patojas* (boys and girls) that swarm around the *galera*. The presence of children usually decreases when they return to their communities to take classes in January; some of them do not return because they work in the cutting and weaving industry.

The majority mother tongue is Mam (91%), followed by Kaqchikel (7%). The rest are other Mexican indigenous languages present in the Huixtla sugarcane ejidos, including Mayan, Zapotec, and Nahuatl workers. Among these workers, there are cases of monolingualism, which is much more pronounced among women and the elderly. Accordingly, among this population, the need has been expressed for children

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<sup>45</sup> The custom of traveling with the whole family to the sugarcane harvest is a common practice among the indigenous population. This practice is present in the rest of the sugarcane regions of Mexico. In the sugar companies of Guatemala, this practice has been eliminated.

<sup>46</sup> In general, the arrangement is through the *cabo* (or foreman). The women in charge of the kitchen are usually family members and most are wives of the workers. This practice is present in all sugarcane-growing regions (García Ortega, 2021).

<sup>47</sup> In Mexico, the international child labor eradication program of zero tolerance has been applied in sugarcane zones since 2016. The issue is very controversial due to the exclusion of parents under 18 years of age from employment, and the lack of opportunity to access educational services in their places of origin and work destination.

<sup>48</sup> The garment in question is called a *corte*, which is known in Mexico as a skirt. It is a long rectangular canvas that measures 7 or 8 rods (a rod measures 85 centimeters) and is tied at the waist; the length reaches the ankle or knee. The models depend on the region and the town, and on the condition of the women who wear them (for example, there is a special dress for married women, young women, widows, and so on). Another difference is in the type of tailoring: whether it is factory-made or woven on a backstrap loom. The prices of *cortes* are much higher if they are handmade and could they cost 4 000 Quetzals on average.

and adults to learn Spanish during their stay in Mexico.<sup>49</sup> These workers arrive with migration permits to work and cover most of the labor demand for annual sugarcane cutters in the Huixtla sugarcane harvest. Prior to 2008, work permits could only be processed for Guatemalan agricultural workers employed in agriculture in Chiapas, which changed at that time to open the labor border to all economical sectors and all states bordering Belize and Guatemala.<sup>50</sup>

It is paradoxical that the Soconusco region still does not value Guatemalan labor, which receives the lowest number of contract offers. Despite the migration permits, their transit and labor rights are not guaranteed.<sup>51</sup> This situation reveals the inconsistency of public policies to promote employment without combining them with migration policy (García & Décosse, 2014).

## Conclusions

The Mexican borders are great multicultural environments and obligatory references for the dispersion of the indigenous population in Mexico, without forgetting that the original peoples on these margins continue to resist in their ancestral territories. One of the processes in the construction of multi-ethnic regions is the labor mobility of workers in the agri-food sector. Tracing the incorporation of agricultural workers in sugar production on Mexico's southern border<sup>52</sup> it may be observed that the Central American indigenous and non-indigenous presence—especially from Belize and Guatemala—is not merely a case of intermittent or emergent incursions into the Mexican cross-border landscape. It is due to a long tradition of mobility, which is neither linear nor monochromatic.

These processes are associated with labor and forced economic migrations, such as the case of the labor incorporation of Guatemalan refugees at the time, today fully integrated into sugar production, as is the case in Campeche. In the same way, agricultural colonization and neo-colonization contexts were considered a background of the territorial construction, based on complex social, family, and hiring networks, created in more than half a century of the history of the modern sugar agro-industry in the southeast. The labor mobility of agricultural workers dedicated to the national sugar harvest is the only example of rural Mexico where a continuum can be traced

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<sup>49</sup> The lack of access to school services in the *galeras* for both national and Guatemalan migrant families is a pending issue on the public agenda. Of the border mills, only in Quintana Roo was the intervention of the Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo.

<sup>50</sup> In the current context of Mexico as a transit country and "second safe country", the labor incorporation of migrant labor from Central America, the Caribbean, and other continents, has different forms due to the timing of the procedures and integration strategies throughout the national territory of people who have arrived in the migrant caravans since 2018, especially under the protection of international organizations and a wide network of civil organizations.

<sup>51</sup> These are young Guatemalans who have been extorted by agents of the Instituto Nacional de Migración, who allege that their border worker work permits are false.

<sup>52</sup> Oral tradition in Pujilic highlights the incorporation of Guatemalan refugees into sugarcane cutting during their residence in Chiapas. The narratives of ex-refugees in the towns of Campeche and Quintana Roo have referred to multiple activities during their period in Chiapas. The narratives relate the experience of working outside the camps to earn their own income, and to complement the goods and services provided by international aid and the Mexican government.

between labor participation at internal regional levels, with nodes of a labor market embedded in a migratory system between Belize, Guatemala, and Mexico.

Although Guatemalan workers and families have been involved in the coffee harvest for more than a century, with settlements in the coffee-growing areas, the nature of labor mobility in the sugar sector is more complex. This agro-industry unites several scales and connections in the migratory diversity in the fifteen producing states, its unique cross-border dynamics, and the broad and plural indigenous workforce. The sugarcane regions of the study are not the only ones in this sector with this multi-ethnic character. However, they stand out for their Central American links and the density of the indigenous population that multiplies the linguistic registers. Practically, the rest of the sugarcane-producing entities employ harvesting groups of native peoples.

An approximation to the results on temporary agricultural work in the sugarcane harvest shows that cutters with ethnic origins in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize are integrated into the national quota, totaling 69% of foreign workers. In comparison, the indigenous participation among local workers is 31%. Adding to this the presence of mestizo workers from other countries, a reliable sample of the multicultural composition of the sugar agro-industrial regions of southern Mexico is obtained.

The indigenous profile of sugarcane workers in the sugarcane regions of the southern border is heterogeneous and traditional, highly dispersed throughout the geographic points of connectivity established by labor contracts. Their labor incorporation in the sugar agro-industrial region of the southeast is evident in regional historical mobility dynamics and the structural relations between regions that export and import labor. In the harvest groups studied, the cutter trade has been perpetuated in at least four generations (ego, children, parents, and grandparents), while the children exemplify a close family resource and the negative effects of the reproduction of excluded labor force.

According to regional histories, local networks are essential to obtain greater labor and social benefits during and after the sugarcane harvest. Other integration strategies are the possibilities of mixed marriage and permanent settlement through various local arrangements for residence. Unquestionably, the contribution of indigenous labor to sugar production is evident. This contribution began five centuries ago when the European idea of industry installed this great socio-political-economic hybrid in this part of the world (Mintz, 1996).

This work aims to contribute to the dynamics of ethnic agricultural labor groups on the southern border and to the theoretical and methodological discussion on the complexity of human mobility systems in South-South labor corridors. The presence of intermittent multi-ethnic enclaves demonstrates how migrations contribute to demographic, cultural, and labor bonds. Just as such an agro-industrial structure sustains national economies in Latin America, the results of this research demonstrate that inequity, inequality, and discrimination are perpetuated in increasingly precarious labor markets, perpetuating the exploitation of a labor force that has been exploited for centuries. Multiethnicity should contribute to human development and the integration of the social fabric that recognizes the contributions of demographic, cultural, and economic bonds, as proposed in this text. In the regions and populations receiving migrant workers and families in this part of Mexico, the centuries-old excuse that has perpetuated exclusion based on social and cultural differences should be discarded. It should be remembered that there is a migrant background in its history.

Based on the projects and diagnoses referred to above, the following public policy recommendations are suggested as a way to resolve the historical debts owed to agricultural workers. Governments, business people, sugar producers, work groups, and host communities of labor destinations are urged to consider the recommendations.

*Cultural dimension:* a) Include in the Programa Nacional de la Agroindustria de la Caña de Azúcar (Pronac), the social dimension with gender, cultural, and migratory (national and international) mainstreaming. With this, the management structures based on five objectives will orient their goals toward better welfare, social development of the agents, direct and indirect, of the system-product chain. b) Consider ethnic relevance in the issuance of messages, labor information, or health campaigns in the face of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. c) For the sugar sector to promote and incorporate the Mexican Standard NMX-R-025-SCFI-2015, on labor equality and non-discrimination, both in the fields and in the factories. There is a lack of official data on the number of female workers in the agribusiness. Non-discrimination is claimed, but the data are not disaggregated. d) Promote intercultural environments among host communities with foreign groups in the sugarcane regions.

*Migratory dimension:* a) Expedite the migratory regularization of foreigners living and working in the agro-industrial border regions with Belize and Guatemala. The most critical situation is at the borders of Río Hondo (Quintana Roo) and Huixtla (Chiapas). b) Create a national registry system for workers and their families (local and foreign) that would make it possible to locate the population working in the national harvest, especially those who move for work; this would guarantee orderly, safe mobility, with rights, within and outside Mexican territory.

*Social dimension:* a) Provide birth certificates and immigration documents to children and heads of Mexican and foreign families to prevent marginalization and social exclusion. b) Promote literacy programs among the national and foreign working population. c) Guarantee access to basic education services in the facilities for national and international migrant workers d) Disseminate comprehensive information on labor and social rights of male and female workers. e) Provide or promote decent housing for individuals and families living in *galeras*. f) Design schemes to provide access to school services, job security, income options, and job training for children under 18 years of age.

*Labor dimension:* a) Promote good labor practices to eradicate forced labor, especially concerning piecework and lack of contracts; ensure that workers' labor rights are guaranteed. b) Guarantee affiliation to the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social for workers and their families, as required by law (it has been demonstrated that the employers do not affiliate 65% of this population). c) Undertake health programs to address public health problems, such as addictions among the male population, especially among the young. d) Improve the infrastructure and basic services of electricity and water in the shelters so that there is a regular and potable water supply with adequate and clean tanks and that the electricity has normal voltage. The main fault is the lack of drainage, which causes high health risks due to puddles (which provide mosquito breeding grounds), mud, and stench. Some workers sleep on the floor. e) Guarantee decent facilities for foreign workers and their families. f) Design a governmental, business, social, and academic co-responsibility strategy in favor of decent work within the Sustainable Development Goals framework and in compliance with the 2030 Agenda. Particular attention should be paid to Goal 8,

related to promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all people. g) Evaluate the International Zero Tolerance Program—which has been in force for a decade—to eradicate child labor in the sugarcane harvest.

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