

# Mexico-Guatemala cross-border labor market: a construction from the experience of the workers

## Mercado de trabajo transfronterizo México-Guatemala: una construcción desde la experiencia de los trabajadores

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### Abstract

The objective of this work is to build the structure and functioning of the local cross-border labor market between the Soconusco region (Chiapas) and the southwest of Guatemala, from a construction “from below”, based on the experience lived by interviewed Guatemalan workers. The cross-border, economic and population perspective was the guide to link the supply and demand of workers, and the places of origin and work destination, as a way to avoid methodological nationalism. The construction of knowledge from daily life allowed to make visible the diversity of the participating actors, as well as the connection between the needs of workers and employers, cross-border labor networks (formal and informal) and the possibilities of crossing, staying and paid work in the neighboring country. The cross-border labor market detailed allows considering new scenarios considering the recent arrival of foreign immigrants to the region.

Keywords: labor market, border, workers, Guatemalans, Chiapas.

### Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es fundar la estructura y funcionamiento del mercado laboral local transfronterizo entre la región de Chiapas del Soconusco y el suroeste de Guatemala, a partir de una construcción “desde abajo”, basada en la experiencia vivida por trabajadores guatemaltecos entrevistados. La perspectiva transfronteriza, económica y poblacional fue la guía para vincular la oferta y la demanda de trabajadores, y los lugares de origen y destino laboral, como una forma de evitar el nacionalismo metodológico. La construcción de conocimiento desde la vida cotidiana permitió visibilizar la diversidad de los actores participantes, así como la conexión entre las necesidades de los trabajadores y los empleadores, las redes laborales transfronterizas (formales e informales) y las posibilidades de cruce, estancia y trabajo remunerado en el país

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vecino. El mercado laboral transfronterizo aquí detallado permite considerar nuevos escenarios a la luz de la reciente llegada de inmigrantes extranjeros a la región.

Palabras clave: mercado laboral, frontera, trabajadores, guatemaltecos, Chiapas.

## Introduction

On the Mexico-Guatemala border, specifically in the co-border region<sup>1</sup> formed by the Soconusco region in Chiapas<sup>2</sup> and the departments of southwestern Guatemala,<sup>3</sup> an average of 277 000 Guatemalan workers who work in Mexican territory cross each year—an estimate based on the Migration Survey on the Southern Border of Mexico (Spanish: *Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México*, Emif Sur) by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (El Colef) and collaborators (El Colef et al., 2018).<sup>4</sup> The labor mobility of Guatemalans to Soconusco is historical. It comes from a labor relationship between foreign and national employers on the Chiapas side, and Guatemalan workers, originating from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the installation of the first coffee farms in the region (Bartra, 1995). The demand for agricultural labor initiated at that time has endured on the part of the large coffee farms of Soconusco, such as Irlanda, Hamburgo, Aargovia, and Germania, among others (Tovar, 2000).

Currently, Chiapas and the Soconusco region is an important agricultural development region—local, regional, national, and agricultural exports, due to the specialization in commercial monocultures and intensive production of coffee, bananas, cane, cotton, corn, soy, papaya, and *ataulfo* mango (Fletes, 2008, 2009; De la Torre González, 2013). On the one hand, agricultural workers themselves participate in the agricultural border economic dynamics. On the other hand, various businesspeople, farmers, and *ejidatarios*—who have formed associations of agricultural producers, and transnational companies, such as Chiquita, a banana trader in the United States—participate as employers.

Between the Soconusco region and southwestern Guatemala, despite the existence of an international boundary between them, there is economic and productive continuity in coffee and banana production (Castillo, 1999). This characteristic

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this text, the notion of co-borders is used as a way to emphasize the relationship between two border spaces, one at the origin (Guatemala) and the other at the destination (Chiapas, Mexico), through everyday practices that make the simultaneous social reproduction of societies on both sides of the border possible. This notion is considered useful for differentiating border spaces in which there is not necessarily an intense, everyday contact between the societies on one side and the other of a border boundary, whose life and social reproduction depends on and occurs on only one side of the border.

<sup>2</sup> The Soconusco region groups together fifteen municipalities in Chiapas: Tapachula, Suchiate, Tuxtla Chico, Cacahoatán, Unión Juárez, Huixtla, Escuintla, Acacoyagua, Acapetahua, Frontera Hidalgo, Huehuetán, Mazatán, Metapa, Villa Comaltitlán, and Tuzantán.

<sup>3</sup> The southwestern region of Guatemala groups together six departments: San Marcos, Quetzaltenango, Retalhuleu, Suchitepéquez, Totonicapán, and Sololá.

<sup>4</sup> The data presented in this work are an estimate based on the Migration Survey on the Southern Border of Mexico (Emif Sur). The flow comes from Mexico to Guatemala and is recorded in the sampling points of Tecún Umán and El Carmen. The average annual value of crossings refers to the period between 2004 and 2018; estimates for 2018 refer to a total of 143 874 labor movements (El Colef et al., 2004, 2018).

translates into similarities in labor specialization between the populations on both sides of the Suchiate River, which is why the Guatemalan population has incorporated itself “almost naturally” into the Soconusco labor market.<sup>5</sup>

In 2018, according to records from the Emif Sur (El Colef et al., 2018), the movements of Guatemalan workers to the Soconusco region were primarily to work in agriculture (21.0%). Every year between October and March, there is an intense flow of seasonal Guatemalan agricultural workers demanded by the Soconusco coffee farms to pick the beans; this call is answered by Guatemalan workers and families (Ordóñez, 2007; Castillo & Vázquez, 2010). In banana production, the demand for workers is constant throughout the year because production is permanent.

With the gradual agricultural development of Soconusco began urban development, with which began the incorporation of Guatemalan workers to the urban area (53.7 of current movements), in the secondary and tertiary sectors.<sup>6</sup> In urban areas, such as Tapachula, Ciudad Hidalgo, and Tuxtla Chico, the demand for Guatemalan workers is created by families—usually domestic workers, waiters, construction workers, and gardeners—and by small local businesses—such as waitresses, cooks, cleaning staff or those who serve the public, and loaders of merchandise, among others. Work for an employer has been complemented by self-employment in activities such as street vending or cross-border trade of Guatemalan products to Chiapas.<sup>7</sup> The activities carried out in urban spaces are usually permanent, so the Guatemalan population is incorporated into dynamics of high cross-border mobility, or it decides to settle in Mexican territory partially.

One of the main and systematic characteristics of Guatemalan work in Soconusco is the precariousness of its incorporation into the labor market: no labor contract is signed with the employer or company (99.0%), and labor benefits are almost nil (in less than 2.0% of the work experiences, a payment is received for vacations, Christmas bonuses, health services, retirement, or savings). Nevertheless, a significant characteristic of cross-border work, and one that is even sought after by the population, is receiving work assistance, such as food and lodging during the time of work in Chiapas.<sup>8</sup>

As can be seen in Figure 1, the cross-border labor dynamics of Guatemalan workers in the Soconusco region intensifies in the municipalities of Tapachula and Suchiate, places of coffee and banana production, respectively; as well as in territories where the main border cities are located, Tapachula and Ciudad Hidalgo, where the two international border bridges in the region are located.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the city of Tapachula is the place where commercial, residential, financial, economic, and

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<sup>5</sup> According to data from Emif Sur (El Colef et al., 2018), in half of the annual crossings, Guatemalan workers indicated that they had worked in Guatemala, but in 27.6% of the cases it was indicated that they had always worked in Mexico, that is, they had no previous experience in their country of origin.

<sup>6</sup> According to Emif Sur (El Colef et al., 2018), Guatemalans crossed over to Soconusco to work in the following sectors: construction (16.4%), retail trade of textiles, clothing, footwear, groceries and food (10.7%), and in households for domestic work (7.0%).

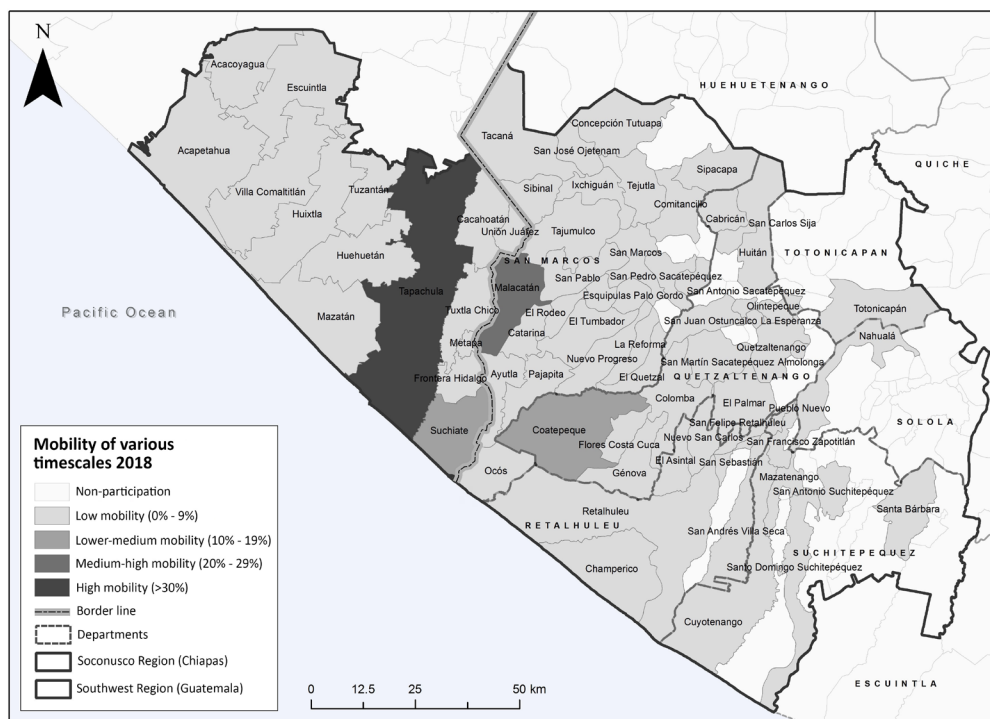
<sup>7</sup> In most of the cross-border labor movements, the Guatemalan worker works for an employer (82.9%) and only 17.0% are self-employed (El Colef, et al., 2018).

<sup>8</sup> According to Emif Sur (El Colef et al., 2018), 29.9% of workers who cross the border receive food—usually two meals a day—and 23.3% get a place to sleep.

<sup>9</sup> The Puente Rodolfo Robles international bridge connects the towns of Ciudad Hidalgo (Suchiate, Chiapas) and Tecún Umán (San Marcos, Guatemala); and the Talismán Bridge connects Talismán (Tuxtla Chico, Chiapas) and El Carmen (San Marcos, Guatemala).

political-migratory life converges in the Soconusco-southwestern Guatemalan border region. Therefore, both the Mexican and Guatemalan populations seek in this place the possibility of work for their daily social reproduction.

Figure 1: Soconusco-southwestern Guatemala cross-border labor region



Source: created by the author based on Emif Sur (El Colef et al., 2018).

In the cross-border labor dynamic, Mexico is the territory of destination of the Guatemalan population, which comes mainly from the border departments of San Marcos and Quetzaltenango,<sup>10</sup> from the municipalities of Malacatán, Catarina, and Coatepeque. It is in these municipalities where they maintain their usual place of residence and only go to work in Soconusco daily (commuters), for a season (the coffee harvest), or remain almost on a stable footing in Mexican territory but with constant returns home (weekly, biweekly, monthly, every three months) (Nájera, 2017).

On the Guatemala-Mexico border there are no walls or fences that limit or prevent population crossings. The Suchiate River is the natural borderline that is crossed over international bridges or by raft. Additionally, there is a migratory regulation that privileges the Guatemalan population for their crossing, stay, and the performance of economic activity in Soconusco, using a Regional Visitor Card (Spanish: *Tarjeta de*

<sup>10</sup> According to data from Emif Sur (El Colef et al., 2018), 75.2% of the labor crossings were by Guatemalans residing in the department of San Marcos and 16.0% in Quetzaltenango. However, there are also workers from thirteen other Guatemalan departments.

*Visitante Regional*, TVR)<sup>11</sup> or a Border Worker Visitor Card (Spanish: *Tarjeta de Visitante Trabajador Fronterizo*, TVTF)—to obtain the latter it is required to have a job offer from the employer.<sup>12</sup>

The above is how cross-border labor mobility can be undertaken in a documented or undocumented manner. According to data from Emif Sur (El Colef et al., 2018), in less than half of the cross-border labor crossings, workers use a TVTF (37.7%). It is more common to use a TVR even if it does not authorize them to work in Mexican territory (53.2%). Furthermore, very few crossings are made in an undocumented manner (less than 10%) since there is a risk of being detained by the immigration authorities of the National Institute of Migration (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) and being treated as a migrant in transit to the United States—which means being taken to the Migration Station and returned to Guatemala after several days.

The study of cross-border labor dynamics between Chiapas and Guatemala has focused on the segmented observation of some economic sector—such as coffee agriculture—in specific trades or occupations—for instance, agricultural workers in coffee or sugarcane, domestic workers, cross-border traders, or street vendors (Santacruz et al., 2008; Wilson, 2014; Fletes, 2008; García, 2014; Ruíz & Martínez, 2015). Additionally, specific groups of populations have been studied, such as Guatemalan children and adolescents working in Tapachula (López, 2012; Rivera, 2011) and Guatemalan cross-border families (Nájera, in press). However, emphasis has also been placed on everyday life experiences in which work and family life are linked in this border space, through regular travel between home and work, and how they configure specific spatial-temporal dynamics and categories (Rojas, 2011; Nájera, 2017).

However, despite the longstanding arrival of Guatemalan workers in the Chiapas region, few academic studies have reflected on the characteristics and functioning of a possible local cross-border labor market. Some that do are the publications of Ordóñez (1993, 2005, 2007), referring to economic integration or the informal economy between Chiapas and Guatemala. In this scenario, this article aims to understand the local Soconusco-southwestern Guatemala labor market from a comprehensive labor perspective—in terms of considering both cross-border supply and cross-border demand for workers—to avoid methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Schiller, 2003). To this end, this work incorporates not only the region of labor destination in Soconusco but also the territories of origin in Guatemala.

For this purpose, a methodological strategy was chosen, which would allow the construction of knowledge from the experience lived through and reported by some of the most relevant actors in this labor system: the Guatemalan workers. Labor heterogeneity was sought among the Guatemalan workers interviewed in order to show a local cross-border labor market that is as close as possible to the reality in Soconusco.

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<sup>11</sup> The TVR allows entry to and stay in the four states of the southern border of Mexico (Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, and Quintana Roo), for up to seven days at each entry (renewable for five years), with multiple entries and exits. This migratory document is managed by the Guatemalan person in the INM offices at one of the border points in Mexico (INM, 2017a). This migratory document does not allow a person to work in Mexican territory.

<sup>12</sup> The TVTF, unlike the TVR, allows the performance of an economic activity in the southern border of Mexico, which is why a job offer signed by the employer or their legal representative (contractor) is required. This permit allows multiple entries to and exits from the country, during one year (INM, 2017b).

This document is organized into three sections. The first one presents, from an economic-demographic perspective, a reflective theoretical and conceptual order that makes it possible to structure the elements that frame a local border labor market with cross-border dynamics. The second section presents the methodological strategy used in this research. The third section presents the results as components of the cross-border labor market between Soconusco and southwestern Guatemala: a supply of Guatemalan workers from an overview of the origin of and demand for workers, and labor opportunities in Chiapas from an overview of the destination. This work concludes with some reflections on the scope of this research in the context of the current labor dynamics on the southern border of Mexico.

### The Study of the Labor Market in Border Areas: Components

This research starts with the study of the labor market from a disciplinary combination of economics and population studies focused on labor issues and international mobility in border areas. From the economic perspective, the labor market is defined by two components: the supply of workers and the demand for workers, which together define the characteristics of work —mainly wages. The existence of an employer who demands a labor force and a worker who seeks a job opportunity establish the main labor link. Based on Toharia (1983) and Craig et al. (1986), depending on the economic trend, the assumptions that govern or intervene in the labor supply-demand link can lead to the consideration of the existence of perfect competition in the labor market (in which all actors have complete information). That there is a rationality of the agents (in which utility maximization plays a part), and that there are variables that are exogenous to labor determination (such as social and cultural policies)—proposed mainly by the neoclassical model. For the economy, the labor supply is the group of the economically active population willing to work. This group is defined by the size of the population and the time one wishes to work, which depends on the individual (neoclassical theory) or the family (new economics of migration).

On the other hand, labor market studies carried out from a social perspective have shown that there are institutions, regulations, and conflicts that do not make it possible to have a “perfect” labor market. Job seekers and providers act with restrictions in specific social, political, and cultural contexts (Granovetter & Swedberg, 2001), or are constrained by the structures where they act, decide, and build their own “employment strategies” (Della Giusta, 2001). In these contexts, there are not necessarily any rational actors, since there are motivations both to work and to stop working, to seek an employer-worker (salaried) type of job or a non-salaried or independent job. From this disciplinary contribution, it has been shown that the socio-demographic conditions of the population, the labor networks, and the institutions involved are also elements that form part of the labor markets (Granovetter, 1992).

Population studies have mainly focused on observing the supply of workers while studying the working conditions of the economically active population or workforce. Labor market studies from this disciplinary perspective emphasize the socio-demographic characteristics of the population, such as gender, age, family position, schooling, type of household, stage of the family life cycle, size of the household unit, and socioeconomic level, as elements that determine the availability of labor that will



make up the supply of workers (García, 2011). It is recognized that the population seeks occupations according to their disposition in time and spatial mobility to perform them according to their individual, family, and contextual characteristics.

Labor studies have shown that the population chooses (when there are options) between salaried jobs, which offer greater job stability despite being subordinated to employer specifications; and self-employed or non-salaried jobs, performing some professional or non-professional activities, such as buying and selling merchandise, or attending to one-person or family micro-businesses. The latter has the advantage of greater labor flexibility, making it more compatible with other activities of daily life like domestic work and childcare (Pacheco, 2011; Rojas, 2010; Rendón, 2004). From the population perspective, the study of labor markets incorporates both employer-worker and independent or self-employed work experiences, since both types of paid jobs serve the purpose of obtaining economic resources that allow for daily social reproduction.

From the economic point of view, as in population studies, it is recognized that, at a more aggregate level, the economic-productive models of each country, region, or local environment, structure the labor possibilities in each territory. Depending on the type of local economy, other forms of labor incorporation of the population are created, such as non-subordinate or independent types. The socio-demographic approach, despite the emphasis on the supply of workers, recognizes that the labor market integration of the population depends not only on the interests of the population willing to work, but also on the interests of the employers according to their own family, commercial, or production needs. However, as Szasz (1990) points out, in most cases, it is the characteristics of the local labor market itself that define the working conditions of the workers employed.

Employers define the demand for workers by determining the number of workers they require, their characteristics, and the working conditions under which they are hired. This is how employers segregate the job opportunities of the population (García, 1989)<sup>13</sup> and, perhaps unintentionally, generate forms of inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and even stigmatization, by forming labor niches in which one or more socio-demographic characteristics—such as gender, age, ethnicity, or migratory status—predominate.

When labor markets are studied in border areas, such as the one in this research, it is necessary to incorporate other substantive elements in order to understand them. These elements can be the very definition of border and cross-border population mobility, the co-border location of the population in search of paid work, the place where labor opportunities are found, and the border situation—in terms of the type of physical and migratory-administrative border that shapes the possibilities of population mobility from one country to another. To incorporate some general elements regarding the notions of border and international boundary, Rodríguez (2014) points out that the border is used as a geopolitical demarcation or zone of contact or coexistence between two (or more) countries. Meanwhile, the boundary

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<sup>13</sup> According to García (1989), two types of segregation can be identified in labor markets: *i*) horizontal segregation, when within the stock of workers there are differentiated labor opportunities according to their sociodemographic characteristics (such as gender, age, ethnicity, and migratory status), which creates occupations or trades specific to each population group—as would be the case with domestic work for indigenous migrant women; and, *ii*) vertical segregation, which refers to jobs of greater or lesser standing, based on the same sociodemographic characteristics.

indicates where the jurisdiction of one State begins and ends with regard to another State(s). In this study, the border is the space adjacent to the territorial, population, and daily life boundary between one country and another. The aim is to observe how two border regions become a cross-border region.

According to Tapia Ladino (2017), the cross-border area is configured through population mobility. The author considers that the proximity of towns or cities is essential, but not a sufficient condition since it is the frequent exchanges or crossings of people across the border—often independently of bilateral disputes—that shape the cross-border area. The above is why this notion is constituted from below, from the territory, by the people who inhabit the territory. The different border practices turn the border into a resource beyond its role as containment or shelter, observing that it is the population movements that unite border spaces and cities, creating the cross-border. In this work, this characteristic is verified and validated in the Soconusco-Southwestern Guatemala region, through the overview provided by the Emif Sur.

In border areas, it is common that the supply of workers is made up of the population interested in working, whether local or from the neighboring country; these are areas where the migratory condition shapes the forms of labor integration of local, immigrant, and cross-border workers (Nájera, 2020). The incorporation of foreign populations into the labor market of the neighboring country may be due to the lack of local labor or to the provision of specific labor skills that make them a better option.

The international migration regulations (ONU, 1990) recognize the existence of migrant workers who are “any person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national” among which, border workers, seasonal workers, and self-employed workers stand out. For this research, frontier workers, also known as commuters, are “any migrant worker who retains his or her habitual residence in a neighboring State to which he or she normally returns every day or at least once a week”.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the labor market, Morales (2016) and Morales and Castro (2006) show that it is possible to identify the existence of two economic-labor spaces around an international boundary. One specializes in the direct production of value, where employment-related activities occur, and the other space is where the labor force is found, which is usually the place of habitual residence. Both border spaces form a production unit that serves as an adjustment mechanism for local labor markets, whose demand for workers in the places of destination is supplied by workers from the places of origin. Thus, the border space reflects the interconnection of local and regional economic activities that give rise to labor diversification in the places of destination (Dickens, 2003).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* (ONU, 1990), in its articles 2.1, 2.2a, 2.2b, and 2.2h, defines *migrant workers*, *frontier workers*, and additionally *seasonal workers* as “any migrant worker whose work by its character is dependent on seasonal conditions and is performed only during part of the year”; and *self-employed workers* as “any migrant worker who is engaged in a remunerated activity otherwise than under a contract of employment and who earns his or her living through this activity normally working alone or together with members of his or her family”.

<sup>15</sup> As in any labor market, border migrant workers are a population group that usually occupies the lowest levels of the labor structure or scale and performs the lowest quality jobs (Solis et al., 2018; Acosta et al., 2015); according to Pioré (1975), they would be in primary sector labor niches - the basis of the labor structure.



For the link between employers and job seekers to take place, employers activate various strategies such as formal labor networks from a recruiter or contractor, who gets the required labor; the publication of the job offer(s) by various means and in different places; or the presence in socially recognized labor recruitment spaces. In addition to the formal labor networks created by employers, there are informal labor networks or social networks. Social networks<sup>16</sup> are an indirect means that make possible the transmission of information regarding the needs of employers or job opportunities through networks of friendship, kinship, and shared origin. Although social networks allow migrants to get a job at the destination, this may be a “possible job” and not the “optimal job” for the skills and abilities of the worker (Canales & Zlotniski, 2001), and even be restricted to employers with whom one has ties. Furthermore, social networks among migrants also transmit information about daily life at the destination (Massey et al., 1994).

In border areas, the characteristics of the existing physical and migratory-administrative border determine the possibilities of cross-border population mobility.<sup>17</sup> The physical border refers to the existence of elements that mark the international boundary, whether natural—such as mountains, volcanoes, rivers, and mountain ranges—or artificial—walls, fences, gates, wires, or boundary markers—on which the possibilities of crossing the border depend. The migratory-administrative border is the regulation and migratory control for the entry and stay of the population in the neighboring country. Between neighboring countries, there is often a differentiated migration regulation for the population that resides in border areas and moves to the neighboring country (Pécoud & De Guchteneire, 2005). These regulations are usually more permissive concerning the crossing, stay, and activity to be carried out, unlike for the non-border population.

The local border migration agreements are based on the idea that people will maintain their habitual residence in their country of origin, with the possibility of entering and leaving the neighboring country for shopping, outings, or work. That is why in border labor markets it is common to have frontier workers, people who, while maintaining their usual place of residence in the country of origin, move daily to the places where they perform paid work and maintain a base or sole residence on either side of the border line (Alegría, 1989). Therefore, the time and cost dimensions of transport for journeys between origin and destination on either side of the border also become relevant elements in understanding local labor markets.

## Methodology

This research includes, as a fundamental source of information, the story of seventeen Guatemalan workers who worked in three of the municipalities of the Soconusco

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<sup>16</sup> The social network is an open system, of permanent construction both individually and collectively, through which there is a dynamic exchange of members to potentialize resources (Dabas, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> But also the mobility of goods, relevant in terms of the labor market when one of the forms of labor participation is the trade in goods from one country to another.

region (Tapachula, Suchiate, and Escuintla), of a total of forty-three interviewed.<sup>18</sup> Eleven female and six male Guatemalan workers were interviewed, who worked in different sectors of the economy in different trades or activities (nine in the agricultural coffee and banana sectors; and eight in non-agricultural sectors, mainly services and construction). Workers were expected to participate differently in the Soconusco labor market (twelve had an employer and four were self-employed) and to have different timescales of cross-border labor mobility (four were daily workers or commuters, one had weekly mobility, three had monthly mobility, three were seasonal agricultural workers, and six were near-permanent workers in Mexico with eventual returns to Guatemala) (Table 1).

Workers were interviewed on either side of the Guatemala-Mexico border; on the Guatemalan side, interviews were conducted at the home of the worker or at one of the two international border crossing points (Tecún Umán or El Carmen) at the time they were moving to work in Soconusco. On the Mexican side, the interviews were mainly conducted in the workplaces, whether they were farms, ejidos, businesses, markets, or selling products in the street; and some were done in places of recreation, on Sunday because it was the day of rest, such as the Miguel Hidalgo Park or other meeting spaces in the city of Tapachula.<sup>19</sup> In choosing to converse with Guatemalans who worked in Soconusco to learn about their experience in the labor market of the region, this work did not consider the work experience of those who only worked on the Guatemalan side.

The characteristics and dynamics of the Soconusco labor market were investigated based on the following guiding questions that emphasized the relevance of the interaction between labor origin and destination. Is there work in Guatemala? What are the characteristics of jobs in Guatemala? Where is there work? How is it obtained? Why does the individual concerned work in Chiapas? What is the working life like between Guatemala and Chiapas? The results presented here were complemented and contextualized with information gathered from field observation and participant observation in workplaces in Soconusco and the Guatemala-Mexico border crossing zone; as well as with information from informal interviews conducted with other key actors in this cross-border labor dynamic, including employers, representatives of agricultural producer associations in the Soconusco region, local population, migration authorities, and members of civil society and international organizations who accompany Guatemalan migrants during their stay in the Soconusco region.

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<sup>18</sup> The only interviews chosen were those that contained greater elements for the understanding of the cross-border labor market of the Soconusco-southwest of Guatemala region, and that maintained the labor diversity initially proposed. However, the rest of the interviews were relevant for consolidating the understanding of elements and labor dynamics in general, so that, although they are not referenced, they are part of the construction of the cross-border labor market. The interviews were conducted by the author of this text in 2012; since the cross-border labor context is persistent in its structural characteristics, the economic, political, and social circumstances do not change substantially over the years, so the time in which the experiences described here were compiled is considered not to impact the construction of the current cross-border labor dynamics, inasmuch as they provide general abstract elements that make possible the construction of the local labor market.

<sup>19</sup> Médecins du Monde mission Tapachula, had a space for advice, support and accompaniment of Guatemalan migrants in Chiapas; in this place some interviews were conducted on Sunday, as it was the day of rest.

**Table 1: Characteristics of the Guatemalan workers interviewed who work in Chiapas**

Name*	Place of origin in Guatemala	Place of work in Chiapas	Temporary work in Chiapas	Employment in Chiapas	Position at work in Chiapas
Álvaro	San Marcos	Escuintla	Seasonal	Agricultural worker, coffee picker	Has an employer; receives payment per piecework, job, or task
Audelina	San Marcos	Tapachula	Daily or commuting	Grocery store from Guatemala to Chiapas	Self-employed (no employer)
Eliseo	San Marcos	Tapachula	Seasonal	Agricultural worker, coffee picker	Has an employer; receives payment per piecework, job, or task
Elvia	San Marcos	Tapachula	Monthly	Domestic worker	Has an employer; receives a fixed salary (salaried worker)
Gabriel	San Marcos	Suchiate	Semi-permanent	Agricultural worker in banana sucker remover	Has an employer; receives a fixed salary (salaried worker)
Hilda	San Marcos	Tapachula	Monthly	Domestic worker	Has an employer; receives a fixed salary (salaried worker)
Idalia	San Marcos	Tapachula	Seasonal	Agricultural worker, coffee picker	Has an employer; receives payment per piecework, job, or task
Juan	San Marcos	Escuintla	Semi-permanent	Foreman on a coffee farm	Has an employer; receives a fixed salary (salaried worker)
Lupita	San Marcos	Tapachula	Monthly	Domestic worker	Has an employer; receives a fixed salary (salaried worker)
Martha	San Marcos	Suchiate	Daily or commuting	Banana protection collector in the packing plant	Has an employer; receives a fixed salary (salaried worker)
Miguel	San Marcos	Suchiate	Daily or commuting	Banana packer on a farm	Has an employer; receives payment per piecework, job, or task
Vilma	Santa Rosa	Suchiate	Semi-permanent	Cleaning worker at a banana packing plant	Has an employer; receives a fixed salary (salaried worker)

\* The original names were changed to protect the identity of the workers interviewed.

Source: created by the author.

The analysis of the stories was organized based on the theoretical reflections presented in the previous section, so there are two major thematic sections. The first refers to the supply of workers, from the experience of the workers in their place of origin or habitual residence in Guatemala; this sub-section contains the working conditions in Guatemalan territory and the motivations for crossing the border with Mexico and working in the Soconusco region. The second section refers to the demand for workers, referring to the Soconusco employers who request workers. Subsequently, the work opportunities in this border region were added, into which those Guatemalans who do not have an employer are incorporated. From the place of work destination, the formal and informal labor networks that appear as a cross-border labor hinge between one side and the other of the international border are shown.

## The Cross-Border Labor Market Between Soconusco and Southwestern Guatemala: Building on the Experience of Guatemalan Workers

From an economic-sociodemographic perspective, the characteristics, and dynamics of the local cross-border labor market in Soconusco are presented below, organized in terms of supply and demand of workers. The economic and social motivations that the Guatemalan population has for moving from their places of origin or habitual residence to Chiapas are referenced as well as the perceived advantages of this territory as a space of labor opportunities. The labor dynamic presented here refers to the experience of Guatemalan workers who cross the Suchiate River daily to go to work in the Soconusco region.

### *The Supply of Workers and Residential Origin: Motivations for Cross-Border Labor Mobility*

Paid work is one of the primary means of obtaining an income to support daily life. Therefore, the search for this leads the population to move to other territories. For the Guatemalan workers interviewed, the employment options are inside and outside Guatemala, as the accounts below show. “Going where there is work” means moving to other Guatemalan departments, such as the capital of the country; crossing the border to go to the Mexican border area and, in some cases, thinking about going to a more distant place like the United States.<sup>20</sup> Work destinations are compared in terms of the cost of living in the place during the time of work, the variety of work options, and the context of living situations; usually, information about these work destinations is shared by social networks, family, neighbors, or friends.

Not leaving the country is one of the first options. Workers who reported having some work experience in the capital of the country, Guatemala City, recognize that it is a good destination because there are ample possibilities of finding a job, since “people

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<sup>20</sup> Among the total number of Guatemalan workers interviewed, only two reported having had any experience of international migration to the United States or the desire to have it in the future; compared to border travel to Chiapas, workers recognize that migration to the United States is more expensive, and requires longer travel and more time away from family, home, and community.

have money to pay”. However, the main problem of moving to the capital is having to assume the prohibitive cost of living there and the context of insecurity. The following stories show this:

In Guatemala City, you have to pay rent, water, and electricity, buy your food, pay for transportation. There are also cases of muggings, rapes, and killings; that is why it is better to come here [to Tapachula] (Lupita, 2012).

In Guate [Guatemala City], I went to work for about six months, but I didn’t like it. I didn’t like it because in the capital you have to pay rent for a place to live, firewood, water to bathe in, all with what little you earn? I worked on a piece of land where they were building houses, and I received forty [quetzals] daily for the work. What I earned I sent home because I was still living with my sister. But my family also decided to go there, and I had to rent a room for 300 quetzals a month, in addition to water, electricity, and everything else. I decided to come here again [to his house in San Marcos], because I thought it was better to go to the other side, to this place [Chiapas], because here, thank God, “everything is free” (Álvaro, 2012).

“Everything is free” is an expression used by Guatemalan agricultural workers to refer to the fact that during the time they work on coffee farms in Chiapas, they do not pay for food, lodging, and transportation to get to the farm. The absence of living expenses while in the workplace is a benefit that is also granted in other jobs, such as live-in domestic work, construction, or working in small businesses in Tapachula.

Employers offer lodging only if there is a place to do so; this can be a room or bedroom—even on construction sites—where they can have a bed, a cot, or a mattress. Concerning food, sometimes no food is offered, but only a place to cook. Both supports are perceived by Guatemalan workers as additional advantages to work, regardless of the conditions or quality. Having these “labor benefits” can become a catalyst for choosing a work destination. Between Guatemala City and Chiapas, living expenses are usually lower in Mexican territory—to which is added the short time and low cost of border travel compared to that required to go to the Guatemalan capital.<sup>21</sup>

In the border area of San Marcos and Quetzaltenango, people usually look for work in rural areas—on the coffee or banana farms in the border area, or in urban areas—such as Malacatán or the capital of San Marcos. The problems in getting a job refer to the limited number of job offers in terms of the number of people looking for a job, the short duration of contracts, the few job benefits offered (they are not always salaried jobs with benefits), and sometimes they refer to the mistreatment they receive from employers.<sup>22</sup> The jobs available are usually of the same type as in Chiapas: agricultural work, construction work, domestic work, or small business jobs.

<sup>21</sup> Traveling from San Marcos to Guatemala City requires a five-hour drive and has an average cost of \$250 Mexican pesos; while crossing to Chiapas takes around thirty minutes (from the municipalities near the border) and the cost of travel to Tapachula is fifteen pesos.

<sup>22</sup> Martha, who works on a banana farm in Soconusco, talks about her experience:

I don’t like being being ordered around by Guatemalans. Here [in Chiapas] the quality of work is better. Here they scold you less than there. Over there [in Guatemala] they even curse at you. There is work over there, everywhere. The pay is the same here as there, the difference is that there you have a vacation, a bonus, and here there is none of that. That’s the difference over there (Martha, 2012).

The perception of those interviewed is that “there are not enough jobs for so many people”. The combination of the demographic factor with the labor factor is shown by comparing the number of adolescents, young people, and adults looking for a job opportunity and the few jobs in Guatemala. When it is recognized that job opportunities exist, the problem of temporariness emerges, since people are hired “during the harvest season” in jobs that last a week, a fortnight or a month, “while the construction work lasts” or while the employer has money to pay a worker. The following accounts bear witness to these links between the number of job opportunities and temporariness of work:

Right now, there is no work there [in Guatemala], they say that in May there will be work, but only for a few people. Sometimes you find a job, and then suddenly, there aren't any jobs anymore, sometimes there are jobs for a week, a fortnight, and so on (Álvaro, 2012).

In Guatemala, there is no income, no work. There are jobs only when it is coffee harvest season, but the coffee harvest is a yearly event, that is when there is work. Here [in the banana industry] there is production for life, production doesn't fail, it goes down a little bit sometimes during the summer, but when winter comes, production goes up, because the plantation needs water. There they give us the productivity bonus, the end-of-month bonus, and the Christmas bonus.<sup>23</sup> That helps us a little. Here one has to put up with it [because there are no benefits]. But we wouldn't be better off there, because work is scarce, the number of workers needed is limited, and many people want to work, which is why we come here [to Chiapas] (Gabriel, 2012).

As Álvaro (2012), a coffee farmer, points out, “you have to cross the [Guatemala-Mexico] border to work, because you have to eat all year round”. For the survival of Guatemalan workers and their families, workers alternate paid jobs between Guatemala and Chiapas, sometimes in the same sector and activity or trade, other times changing. From the experiences of the workers interviewed, cross-border labor mobility is a life strategy defined mainly by the periods when there is no work in Guatemala. If there is no work year-round, then they work all year on the Mexican side. This co-border labor strategy (in which the resources of each side of the border are used) makes it possible for them to sustain themselves economically throughout the year.

On the Guatemalan or Mexican side, paid work is the primary means of acquiring goods and services necessary for daily sustenance in Guatemala or during the time of stay in Chiapas. At times, the food security of the workers—mainly the peasant and indigenous population due to the conditions of extreme poverty in which they live—depends on the work carried out in Chiapas. At other times, the work in Chiapas represents an income that makes it possible for them to improve their diet, ensure the access to education of their children, attend to the health needs of family members, start a business, invest in construction to expand their homes, or buy land in installments, among others. The above is how cross-border work fulfills diverse functions for these families. The precarious living conditions of the Guatemalan border population always motivate people to cross into Chiapas to obtain “extra money”, even if they have

<sup>23</sup> In Guatemala, workers receive a productivity bonus, an end-of-month bonus, and a Christmas bonus, all of which are employment benefits in addition to the salary or fixed payment.



formal employment in Guatemala. Some workers make use of the vacation period at work or school. Others explicitly request a permit to seize a better job opportunity in Soconusco, as observed in the following accounts.

We went to ask the manager there [in Guatemala] for permission. We thanked him, right? We told him that if we were unable to cross over [to Chiapas], we would ask him again for work and whether he would take us back. With his permission, we're here now. But we also thought that if we didn't like the farm, we would look for another job nearby (Idalia, 2012).

Only when I'm on vacation where I work [in Guatemala] do I come to work in Chiapas; every year, I've come to work here, during my two-week vacation. Right now, since I'm going to be laid off [in Guatemala], I don't know how long I'm going to be here (Miguel, 2012).

Few of the Guatemalan workers interviewed had ever held a full-time, salaried job with an indefinite contract in which they received all the labor rights granted by law in Guatemala.<sup>24</sup> Although workers expect to have a formal job in Guatemala, in the labor transfer to Soconusco, they do not expect the same, since they assume that they will not have all the labor rights of law because they are from another country. Even so, having a paid job makes it possible for them to have a better life than they would have staying in Guatemala.

As was shown in the first section of this text, almost half of the Guatemalans who move to Chiapas for work have begun their working life in Soconusco. This characteristic becomes the reason to keep working only on the Mexican side since their labor networks are there. Audelina, a food merchant from Guatemala who works in Mexico, speaks about her experience:

Here [in Guatemala] no one knows me, and I don't know anyone; there are merchants from there [Chiapas] and merchants from here, each one on his or her side. I'm used to working on that side [in Chiapas], so I only work there (Audelina, 2012).

Being a cross-border worker in Soconusco is not always the result of an economic-labor motivation, but the consequence of having arrived in a new territory due to the need or desire to leave the place of habitual residence. Some Guatemalans who work in Soconusco arrived in Chiapas because they fled conflicts or domestic violence, or because of the high rates of violence or insecurity in the community. Intrafamily problems, including misunderstandings, fights over land ownership, alcoholism, verbal and physical aggression, and even death threats, decrease, are resolved, or simply cease to be perceived by crossing over to the other side of the Suchiate River. Hilda, a domestic worker in Tapachula, relates her experience:

He [the father of her two daughters] wanted to torment me all day long; he would beat me and drink a lot. I arrived here [in Tapachula] to escape that problem. "I'd better go", I said, "and maybe that'll be the end of it". I could look for work in Guate, where there is indeed a lot, but he would be there, so I'd better not, that's why I came here [to Tapachula] (Hilda, 2012).

<sup>24</sup> These include health insurance, bonuses, productivity bonuses, vacations, and pensions at retirement age.

When the violence is at the community level, expressed in robberies, muggings, rapes, killings, or threats, caused by criminal groups such as the Mara Salvatrucha or Barrio 18, or drug traffickers, the mobility can be of one person or an entire family. Sometimes it is the parents who ask their adolescents or young children to go to Chiapas to get away from the criminal groups and thus keep them safe. Under these circumstances, the Guatemalan population seeks a different place to work or even to settle temporarily, “one that is far away, but not so far away”; in these cases, moving across the border to Chiapas is a strategy of protection or prevention, as described below:

It's beautiful here [in Chiapas], here there are not many problems like in Guate, over there you can't go out for a stroll because gang members are quick to stop you. Right now, if you don't want to give them [money], they'll kill you, but not here, which is why I prefer to be here (Eliseo, 2012).

I came here [to Chiapas] because it's better not to have a lot of money, but this way, you're not afraid that they'll come and kill you for ill-gotten money (Martha, 2012).

Finally, there are other motivations for crossing the border into Chiapas, which are not related to economic or violent reasons, but rather to a genuine interest in getting to know a place or city other than the usual place of residence or to start an independent life. This group usually includes Guatemalan adolescents and young people who indicated that they came to Tapachula because they wanted to get to know the largest city in the Mexico-Guatemala border region or because they wanted to start a life away from their family. In these cases, cross-border work is an explicit objective or a result of a need for mobility.

In this scenario, although the factors that function as a catalyst for the cross-border mobility of Guatemalans to Soconusco are diverse, in cross-border labor participation, the economic factor predominates over social factors. At the same time, the former makes it possible to resolve major needs such as the economic support of the worker or the family group. In any case, within a restricted range of options, the Guatemalan population that chose Chiapas as its alternative for work or temporary stay is part of the supply of workers, labor, or population in search of a job opportunity in the local labor market of Soconusco.

### *The Demand for Workers and the Destination: Cross-Border Employment Opportunities*

Who needs workers? Where is it possible to work? The economy of the Soconusco region demands workers to carry out agricultural and non-agricultural tasks; farmers, *ejidatarios*, micro-entrepreneurs, and local families serve as employers not only for Guatemalans but also for Mexicans or people from other countries that have come to live in the border region. The Guatemalan population can be hired by an employer—who requests their labor—or be self-employed or independent in Soconusco. In both forms of employability, the most common means of obtaining paid work on the other side of the Suchiate River are the formal and informal cross-border labor networks deployed in the co-border area between Mexico and Guatemala.

The Guatemalan workers interviewed have the perception that Chiapas is a territory with job opportunities, where there is an explicit demand for labor in certain sectors of the economy—such as agriculture, construction, and services—or where they can create their own work—from street vending to setting up their own business. In the agricultural sector, the workers interviewed indicated that, on dozens of farms and ejidos producing coffee, bananas, papaya, sugarcane, mango, lemon, or rambutan, among other products, workers are hired for a season or almost permanently—so it is possible to come at any time of the year and find a job. In the urban sector, in small and medium businesses and homes, domestic workers, construction workers, and workers in various services are sought.

As mentioned in the introduction to this study, Chiapas is the main agricultural producer of coffee and plantains in the country, which is why dozens of farms and ejidos in the region require labor throughout the year, whether national or foreign, as long as they “know how to do the job”. Coffee farms are known for hiring large amounts of labor during the coffee harvest season, which can reach up to 350 workers<sup>25</sup> for October through March. A basic (minimum) number of workers is permanently required to maintain the plantation<sup>26</sup> and the farm areas—bedrooms, bathrooms, and dining room for the workers, nursery, offices, warehouses, and the house of the owner.

In banana farms and ejidos, the demand for workers is constant throughout the year, while fruit production is permanent. If the production unit dedicated to the export of the fruit (usually to the United States through transnational companies such as Chiquita<sup>27</sup>) is added to this characteristic, the demand for labor then requires high productivity. In these workspaces, workers are needed in more than eighteen activities carried out daily in the field (maintenance and production), in the packaging areas, and in transportation.<sup>28</sup> Labor specialization in these places is highly valued due to the specificity of each function in the production process.

It is typical that when there is a demand for workers to sustain productivity, the available labor is used to the fullest extent, so the more work there is, the more work is done, and the more profit is obtained by Guatemalan workers and employers—obviously on different scales. Moreover, when the applicant for a job has no work experience in banana production, he or she is hired to aid in lower-ranking tasks, which implies a high rotation of the labor force. Vilma, a worker on a banana farm in Suchiate, is a sample of this:

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<sup>25</sup> Each production unit according to its production per hectare and the destination of its production defines the number of seasonal workers it requires.

<sup>26</sup> Workers are required for the reception and cleaning of cherry coffee, pulping, removal of mucilage (fermentation and washing), drying, storage and grinding of parchment coffee, the classification of gold coffee, packing, and transportation.

<sup>27</sup> Chiquita Brands International is a U.S. company dedicated to the production of bananas—whose plantations are located in southern Mexico and Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama)—and is the main distributor in the United States. Chiquita is the successor company to the United Fruit Company, created at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>28</sup> In field work, work is done in the irrigation of herbicide or fertilizer, in the thawing, cleaning, or replanting of plants, bagging, cutting, and carrying of banana clusters to the packing house. In the packing area, it is possible to work in the reception of the fruit, removing the protection of the clusters, deflowering, removing the residue, classifying or selecting the fruit, and in the activities of weighing, fumigation, labeling, packing, quality control, and stowage. Furthermore, there are those who work in the cleaning and packing of “fingers”.

They ask me to sweep, and they ask me to go search for fingers<sup>29</sup>. They tell me to “keep learning when there is nothing to do here [cleaning], go see how they work [in other areas], and learn, then you will be able to do other activities and earn more” (Wilma, 2012).

It seems common that, from the experience of the workers interviewed, the coffee and banana exporting farms of Soconusco always require more workers than they have. The Guatemalan workers that do not find work on one farm or ejido go on to another, or another, or another after that, but in the end, a job is found. The worker offers his or her services for one activity or another. In this search for work in the rural border area of Chiapas, it is almost certain that a job opportunity will be found “doing one thing or another”.

Finally, recruitment and immigration status are linked differently in the coffee and banana sectors. While it is true that the majority of seasonal laborers hired on coffee farms have a labor migration document issued by the INM that guarantees their legal stay and performance of a paid labor activity, the INM is not responsible for ensuring that the labor rights of workers are respected, even if they have a contract that stipulates working conditions. In the hiring of Guatemalan workers on banana farms, there is no labor migration documentation for two reasons. The border crossing is done through areas where there is no migration inspection, and the cross-border workers do not sleep in the workplace—since they are all daily or commuting workers, so it is considered that when they leave the farm or ejido, they do not need to justify their legal stay in Mexican territory.

Regarding the non-agricultural sectors of the Chiapas economy, Guatemalans who come to the main cities of Soconusco, such as Tapachula, Ciudad Hidalgo, or Tuxtla Chico, to look for a job in a business or in a house, are looking to sell a certain product or offer a certain service to the local population. Guatemalan workers who work for an employer are employed in a customer service business (restaurants, stationery stores, tire repair shops, hair salons, or selling ice, cell phone cards, or clothing), do domestic work in houses in the urban area, or help in the construction of houses or businesses. Although few, there are also street vendors who work for an employer, who provides them with the merchandise to be sold and pays them a daily wage.

Guatemalans who are self-employed, without an employer, work as independent street vendors of sweets and cigars, selling vegetables brought from Guatemala outside markets and supermarkets, or clothing in parks and plazas. Some offer to help load goods in markets, outside supermarkets, or on the banks of the Suchiate River. Finally, there are the cross-border traders who move Guatemalan edible and non-edible goods into Mexico for sale to local businesses. The last group of independent workers has set up their own business in Chiapas to sell a product or offer a service—a market stall, hair salon, grocery store, or other. This group of Guatemalan workers has a different labor relationship with the society in Chiapas since they must have commercial relations with the locals to rent premises, contract services, and even pay taxes to the corresponding institutions.

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<sup>29</sup> “Finger” is the name given to a loose banana from the stalk, which is packed separately for sale in local market businesses. “Finger search” is the work of collecting and packing the bananas that were detached from the stalks.

Self-employment allows workers to define their work characteristics such as working hours, workspace,<sup>30</sup> the value of their product or service, and the work period—taking advantage of peak seasons that offset “low sales”. Audelina, a food merchant from Guatemala to Tapachula, speaks about her experience:

The more you can work, the more you benefit. In December, there’s more work, something I can take advantage of since I sometimes make two trips [to Tapachula per week]. As my children are on vacation, they can go with me. Since I can travel earlier in the day, at around eleven or twelve, I am returning from the first trip. In times like these, I can go back [to Guatemala] at eight at night (Audelina, 2012).

When the Guatemalan population looks for a job on the other side of the Suchiate River, in all possible places and conditions, that is, in rural and urban areas, and any of the trades or activities to be carried out within each economic sector, either working for an employer or not, it is very likely that one will be found. This practice validates the idea that in Chiapas, “there is always work”. The needs of Guatemalan workers and the needs of employers in Soconusco find common ground that shapes a local cross-border labor market. The little or almost no labor participation of the local population in certain jobs,<sup>31</sup> such as agricultural and domestic work, have led the Guatemalan population to form its own labor niches, which are socially labeled, and even stigmatized, as “Guatemalan jobs”.<sup>32</sup>

So that the demand for workers from Chiapas can find an echo in the supply of Guatemalan workers, the employers of Soconusco activate cross-border labor networks, created by themselves to obtain the number of workers they require, with the characteristics and for the period they need. These networks are more frequent among agricultural producers, although they exist in other sectors of the economy. The main actors are the hiring agents or contractors, who are permanent workers trusted by the employer, usually of Guatemalan origin, and whose task is to obtain “good workers”.

The coffee and banana employers of Soconusco have “their contractor”. This contractor, as the link between the demand and supply of workers, is in charge of disseminating in Guatemala, through printed or audible media, the job opportunities offered by the employer in Chiapas. He or she then transfers those interested to the Guatemala-Mexico border, carries out on behalf of the employer the corresponding labor migration documentation process for all workers before the INM, and finally brings the Guatemalan workers to the workplace in Soconusco.

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<sup>30</sup> In the case of street vendors, they usually have to reach agreements with other established vendors, especially those working for an employer, since they are deployed in the area of highest sale—downtown Tapachula.

<sup>31</sup> Informal conversations with representatives of the Soconusco Agricultural Association of Coffee Producers and the Soconusco Agricultural Association of Banana Producers, in which it was noted that just over 90% of their workers are of Guatemalan origin.

<sup>32</sup> Exclusive employment is also observed in other jobs held by the Central American population in the Soconusco region, as is the case of sex work attributed to Honduran women (Fernández, 2012). From labor studies at the individual level (career paths), more elements could be offered to distinguish the jobs that neighboring locals and foreigners perform throughout their lives in the region, as well as to identify that there are jobs that the receiving community does not want or does not wish to do, which turn the work and lead the people to diverse forms of exclusion (for “the others”).

In general, the contractors choose to start searching for workers in their home municipality or others they already know, preferring workers already known or “recommended”, those who are reliable, have work experience, and who are not “troublesome”. If this first choice does not meet the number of workers requested by the employer, new workers are sought. In this manner, a labor network that is initially “closed” or limited to the connections of the employer becomes an “open” labor network, which can be accessed by any Guatemalan interested in working.

Although these cross-border labor networks are usually formal, because they come from Soconusco employers, sometimes situations arise where there is a lack of precision regarding the hiring conditions of workers (wages, activity to perform, location of the farm, or ejido, labor benefits). However, despite this and in the face of the need to get a job, they decide to leave with someone who promises them a paid job. In the case of Guatemalan workers who already have previous cross-border work experience, they sometimes stop using the labor network of the employer and go directly to the property to apply for a job. Some experiences are reflected in the following stories:

You go where they take you; you don't know where the place is. We only know that we are going to work; they don't tell us how much they will pay us; we don't know if they will give us one or two meals or if there are actually any beds to sleep in (Eliseo, 2012).

Employers don't hire just anyone. They don't ask people they know for their “papers” [immigration documents] because they know and trust you; if someone is asked for “papers”, then it means that they are not trusted (Álvaro, 2012).

I think we always find work because they [the employers and contractors] trust us, we know a lot about coffee work and being a farmer. We know how to work. Sometimes they ask whether “you know how to work”, sometimes some just say “yes”, and they end up staying there (Juan, 2012).

Sometimes Guatemalan contractors or recruiters play not only the role of cross-border labor manager for the employer but also a social role in the Guatemalan community where they get the workers. At the request of parents, spouses, or other family members, the contractor becomes the custodian, caretaker, or guardian of adolescents and young people who move without their parents—particularly if they are single women—or of married women who move without their spouse.

In addition to the formal labor networks between job seekers and providers on either side of the Suchiate River, there are informal labor networks that serve a similar function by disseminating information regarding the existence of employment opportunities in Chiapas. However, these informal networks are created through family and non-family ties—in which friends, neighbors, and fellow-countrymen are found. These networks provide not only labor information but also basic information to help people get by in Soconusco while they are working, such as finding a place to live, learning how to get around in the city (local transportation), knowing where to access health services, and linking people on both sides of the border by sending goods, money, or messages.

Family networks are usually the first contact for getting a job in Chiapas, through parents, aunts, nephews, cousins, or brothers-in-law who have had some previous or



current work experience on the other side of the border. The family members inform, motivate, bring, set up, and even act as “guardian or guarantor” of the family member to the employer. The family network plays a very important role for those workers who cross into Chiapas for the first time because it permeates the lack of familiarity, fear, and dependence on another person as support in crossing, border mobility, and the search for work, as expressed in the following stories.

I feel confident because I come with an acquaintance. He tells me where to cross the river, where to take the bus, where to ask something, he tells me basically everything (Hilda, 2012).

There was a person in the park, and he took me there. “Do you want to work?” he asked, “Yes”, I said, “Come”, he said. Sometimes it’s scary because you don’t know where they’re going to take you. You don’t know the person. Once the person takes you, you start knowing them, but before all of that, they take you, and you don’t know where you’re going (Elvia, 2012).

Typically, the first work experience in Chiapas is associated with the work history of parents or family members with previous experiences. For this reason, an intergenerational transfer of work and the perpetuation of Guatemalan labor niches come to mind. However, some, usually teenagers and young men and women, venture to explore other work niches on their own.

The historicity of the cross-border labor phenomenon allows Guatemalans who do not have formal or informal labor networks to access work in Chiapas. They can do so simply by crossing the border and going to places where they are told that they will find work. Some such places are “Casa Roja”, an INM office that documents cross-border workers located at the Talismán-El Carmen border bridge; the parks of the main border cities, Tecún Umán (on the Guatemalan side) and the Miguel Hidalgo Park (in the city of Tapachula, Chiapas). Workers can also go to the various local markets in Tapachula, the streets where street vendors gather, or directly to the farms and ejidos on the margins of the highway that runs from the Pacific Ocean to the city of Tapachula, parallel to the Suchiate River.

Finally, it should be noted that from the experience of the Guatemalan workers interviewed in the Soconusco cross-border labor market, it can be deduced that their labor participation in Mexican territory not only makes it possible for the social reproduction of themselves and their families, but also that of employers, families, and residents of the Mexican side who demand their labor, personal services, or the goods that they trade. In this scenario, it is also possible to recognize the importance of the paid economic activity that thousands of Guatemalans carry out daily in Mexican territory. This activity includes cleaning houses and work areas; taking care of children; tending to the areas of agricultural production of coffee and bananas; the construction of houses and businesses; serving clients in restaurants and customers in car washes and vulcanizers; selling candy and food on the streets; supplying businesses with Guatemalan products that are consumed in Soconusco; or offering their services as hairdressers, longshoremen, or manicurists, among others. Gabriel, a banana field worker, expresses it as follows:

My work here is as a sucker remover, which entails locating the seeds [of the banana plant] to ensure that they don't counterbalance each other, that they go their own way, that they don't come together, by separating them, seeing that they don't collide with each other. I straighten them out. It is to ensure production. It is pure care for production. [...] We are the ones who make the plantation thrive. So, what's in it for us? Nothing. Without us, the children of the bosses do not eat; without us, there is no production. We are the ones who follow through (Gabriel, 2012).

## Conclusions

In the traditional link between causes of departure and reasons of attraction for migration, established in the migration laws by Ravenstein (1889) more than a century ago, this article made possible the foundation and connection of the main causes of departure of the Guatemalan population from their places of habitual residence in the Guatemalan border zone to the main causes of attraction to the labor destinations in the border zone on the Mexican side. Additionally, in the case of the study of labor markets located in border areas, substantive elements were incorporated for their functioning and dynamism. The first of these elements is recognizing the importance of the population dimension as a component and perspective. Neighboring foreign workers maintain their usual place of residence in the country of origin, and it is through daily cross-border mobility that they are incorporated into the labor market of the country located on the other side of the international boundary. The population as a supply of workers or labor is a component of the relevant labor market that sustains it, in this case the Soconusco labor market, where workers are only visible from a perspective of population mobility, in which international mobility and migration is only another way in which people residing in border areas participate in the labor market of the neighboring country.

The second element is the border as a regulatory component of the cross-border labor market. The type of international border between neighboring countries defines the economic-labor possibilities and potentialities in the region, in terms of the existence of walls and fences and the forms of regulation and migration control that allow or obstruct the incorporation of workers into the area of labor demand. The above creates formal and informal labor dynamics that shape a local cross-border labor market. On one side of the border, the demand for workers is often greater than the number of local workers willing to work. Therefore, neighboring cross-border workers complement or fulfill the needs of employers at the destination. Finally, border boundaries are elements borne by formal and informal cross-border labor networks, which connect the demand and supply of workers and societies in general in neighboring countries.

The third element is recognizing the predominance of economic motives in cross-border labor movements over other reasons for mobility (such as violence or genuine interest in another place). In this manner, the workforce that enters the local labor market of the neighboring country has as its main driving force the search for paid work that will improve the living conditions of the worker and his or her family. Depending on the Guatemalan socioeconomic context, people, once they consider

the labor alternatives available to them, choose to join the Soconusco labor market as a labor destination, all within a restricted framework of local options in a co-border micro-region.

In this scenario, the needs of Guatemalan workers are combined with the needs of employers in Soconusco—whether they are farmers and agricultural export *ejidatarios*, small entrepreneurs, business owners, or families—molding a daily life that makes it possible for the joint and dependent social reproduction of populations adjacent to an international borderline. Nevertheless, the economic benefits are significantly more lucrative for the latter than for the former. There is no doubt that part of the agricultural economic development of Soconusco is based on Guatemalan participation as a labor force, since “without the workers of Guatemalan origin, we [the employers] would not be able to work the farms; there would be no coffee cultivation” (Zúñiga, 2009).

Despite the historical cross-border labor relationship in this region, it is still important to continue to discuss and think about it. A particular point of discussion is the labor and migration regulatory frameworks that make possible the recognition and assurance of the labor rights of the Guatemalan population working on the southern border of Mexico, with proposals that are more in line with the daily, real, and current dynamics. In this sense, it should be noted that in the current regional migratory context between Mexico, Central America, and the United States, it is likely that the southern border of Mexico will be consolidated as a space for the temporary or permanent settlement of various foreign populations that have arrived in recent years at the southern border (due to the migrant caravans). The above is coupled with the migration policy actions of the Mexican government to retain these populations in this region by offering local labor opportunities.

However, it is important to note that the population and economic-labor links between the local and the foreign population in this region are different if they are neighbors. It is also important to consider the socioeconomic characteristics of the population that arrives at the places of destination. It should be emphasized that the cross-border Guatemalan workers referred to in this work are characterized by precarious living conditions—such as poverty, some because they are peasants and of indigenous origin, or they have a low level of education linked to non-agricultural work, and socioeconomic characteristics different from other labor populations that have recently arrived in the region. For their part, Guatemalan residents tend to maintain their place of origin as a place of residence and main access to rights. At the same time, non-neighboring foreigners, upon establishing themselves in the area, have stable access to the city and its resources (which has generated, according to local accounts, expressions of xenophobia, discrimination, and exclusion by the local population). In this scenario, it is possible to think of the labor market in the Soconusco region from a perspective of labor integration and not just cross-border labor mobility.

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