MIGRANT ASSOCIATIONS: A VALUABLE BRIDGE BETWEEN MEXICO AND ITS DIASPORA

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Introduction

The literature on migration pays close attention to the development of social and professional networks. Associations constitute a formal manifestation of such networks (López, Escala-Rabadan and Hinojosa-Ojeda 2001). For domestic and international migrants who face a foreign environment, these associations respond to the need for belonging. They provide migrants simultaneous membership in local, state, national, and transnational communities (Minian 2017). Migrants also receive useful information, resources, and companionship from these associations to better assimilate into the host society (FitzGerald, 2008). Some authors have used the generic term “transnational migrant organizations” to refer to these associations.

The objective of this paper is to describe the types of associations migrants from Mexico have formed in the U.S. (including their aims, member profiles, results, links to stakeholders and governmental officials, etc.), and analyze their social and political roles. The analysis departs from the premise that some categories of Mexican migration do not fit in the classic theoretical concept of ethnic enclaves, but instead asserts that many Mexican migrants group in different spaces and contexts depending on their particular interests and on the kind of opportunities they identify.

Some authors have referred to specific characteristics organizations must fulfill to be considered immigrant associations, namely being formal, private, nonprofit, self-governing, and voluntary (Salamon and Anheier 1992, as cited in Babis 2016). Babis (2016, p. 359) defines immigrant organizations as “nonprofit organizations, founded by immigrants at all stages of immigration, with the purpose of serving mainly the immigrant group itself.”

Much attention has been paid to migrants’ economic contributions to their home countries through remittances, but their involvement in long-term projects through associations, which may have not only an economic but also a significant social and/or political impact, has been less discussed. Migrant associations play a key transnational role since it has been found that individual cross-border activities (linking the host and home countries) are not as common as activities conducted through specific organizations (Portes and Zhou 2012). It is also more likely that governments approach migrant associations (rather than individuals) to plan and implement joint projects.

Mexican migrant organizations have existed in the U.S. for more than 150 years. The reasons for their creation continue to be the same, namely to defend migrants against discrimination, labor rights violations, deportation, and problems related to repatriation (Cano and Délano 2004). Many of these organizations were formed in the 1960s with the main goal of strengthening ties with the Mexican government. The number of Mexican migrant associations increased dramatically in the early 1990s (Cano and Délano 2004).

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1 Luis Enrique Acevedo Slim provided excellent research assistance for this project.
2 It is worth mentioning the effort conducted in this sense by Princeton University through the Comparative Immigrant Organization Project (CIOP).
The Institute of Mexicans Abroad (Instituto de Mexicanos en el Exterior, or IME)³ is the first Mexican governmental transnational institution in the history of relations between the Mexican government and the Mexican community in the U.S. (Somerville, Durana and Terrazas 2008). Its website lists 2,643 Mexican associations in the U.S. as of 2019, but it is difficult to track the exact number of such associations since they form and dissolve constantly. Furthermore, Mexican migrant associations are very diverse in terms of their density and distribution (Fox and Bada, 2008).

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. The first section centers on the types of Mexican migrant associations that currently exist in the U.S. The second identifies the main purposes of these associations, while the third section analyzes their operational structures. The fourth section provides information about the profile of the associations' members. The next three sections present the types of activities these associations perform, the kind of links they cultivate, and the results of their actions. Finally, policy implications and conclusions are offered.

Types of Associations

Although Mexican migrant associations in the U.S. proliferated from the 1970s onward (Escala-Rabadán, Bada and Rivera Salgado 2006) and dramatically increased in number in the 1990s, they have gained importance in recent years mainly because they portray Mexican migrants as active players whose voices resonate in the civic and political arenas. Escala-Rabadán, Bada, and Rivera Salgado (2006) refer to the term migrant civil society as “migrant-led institutions in the host society: public spaces, communications media, but specifically membership organizations” (p. 128). In the same vein, Fox and Bada (2008) consider four different “areas of collective action”: “autonomous public spaces (such as large-scale cultural or political gatherings), migrant-led NGOs, the migrant-led mass media, as well as migrant-led membership organizations” (p. 443).

There is a wide range of associations that can be classified into different categories, such as professional (entrepreneurs, for example), social, hometown associations (HTAs), political, charitable, civil rights, heritage preservation, legal advocacy groups, faith-based organizations, indigenous rights groups, youth organizations, and community media, among others. These associations may overlap in their collective identities.

Migrants join associations based on different common interests such as their profession, town of origin, or ethnic affiliation (Somerville, Durana, and Terrazas 2008).

Hometown associations (HTAs), considered the first form of cross-border organization established by Mexican migrants in the United States (Rivera-Salgado 1999), are created with the aim of raising funds to improve living conditions in migrants’ places of origin, contributing particularly to the development of vulnerable fields such as health and

³ In 1990, the Programa para las Comunidades Mexicanas en el Exterior (Program for the Mexican Communities Abroad, or PCME) was created to strengthen the links between Mexico and its emigrants, and to protect their rights and development while in the U.S. In 2003, the PCME became the Instituto de los Mexicanos en el Exterior (IME) to promote strategies and programs aimed at raising the living standards of Mexicans living abroad.
education (Orozco and Welle 2006). They became the most prevalent organizational form for Mexican migrant communities (Escala-Rabadán, Bada and Rivera Salgado 2006). They gained the most visibility in the 1980s when they provoked a more committed involvement of the Mexican government toward the betterment of communities (Minian 2017). According to Rivera-Salgado (2015), HTAs are mainly located in California, followed by Texas and, at a distant third, Illinois. They have a transnational nature and are particularly focused on seeking a collective benefit. A central characteristic of HTAs is their active support for the civic engagement of undocumented migrants (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010). In Mexico, Zacatecas is the state with the highest level of HTA activity (Orozco and Welle 2006). In fact, migrants from Zacatecas were pioneers in creating HTAs and as well in forming the first federation integrating several home-region clubs (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010).

Implicitly, the existence of these HTAs repositions migrants in their communities of origin as key actors on political and social issues, providing them with recognition that otherwise would not be attainable. These migrants become agents of development (Orozco and Welle 2006; Somerville, Durana, and Terrazas 2008) even though in many cases, they lack proficiency in English or U.S. cultural fluency, and have low levels of educational attainment.

It is important to make a distinction between associations founded by Mexican immigrants living in the U.S. and those founded by Mexican Americans, since their aims and organizational structures tend to be very different. In terms of their purposes, the former are focused on hometown projects, whereas the latter aim to advocate for civil rights (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes, 2010). This paper focuses on associations founded by Mexican immigrants living in the U.S.

Migrant associations can also be distinguished by their members’ backgrounds. In the case of HTAs, most of the migrants are from rural areas of Mexico. Evidently, these are the most prevalent associations since traditional migration from Mexico is mainly rural, primarily involving immigrants with low levels of education and earnings who have an enduring loyalty to their communities of origin (Portes and Zhou 2012). Recently, there has been a surge in the creation of middle class migrant organizations, which tend to be linked to migrants’ professions. These associations also represent a very diverse political and ideological spectrum (Rivera-Salgado, 2015).

Migrant associations also have different levels of empowerment and influence in both their home and host countries, depending on their resources (money, staff, members’ profiles, etc.), civic presence, and political presence and influence (Ramakrishnan & Bloemraad 2008, as cited in Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010).

**Association Aims and Goals**

The purposes of these associations vary greatly, from just sharing experiences to planning and executing concrete productive projects. Many of them have a philanthropic or social nature, while others have a development goal (e.g., job creation and investment) (Orozco
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and Lapointe 2004). Even though some of these associations do not lead directly to the execution of a productive project, they do strengthen the bases of their communities (Moctezuma 2003, as cited in Orozco and Welle 2006), and they meet specific needs of immigrants, which tend to be very different than the needs of the host society.

From a generic perspective, associations can be classified in terms of their purpose as either integration associations (more focused on the host country) or development associations (more focused on the home country) (Somerville, Durana, and Terrazas 2008). Some of these associations are multipurpose or have a transnational nature. In this sense, Fox (2010, in Bada et al., 2010) refers to these associations as pursuing a two-track strategy, performing practices of “civic binationality.” Conversely, some of these associations are single-issue organizations that seek to advance specific goals (Hazan 2006).

The purposes of these associations range from mere philanthropy to civic participation, including helping new immigrants integrate to the host society’s culture or creating a collective identity (Babis 2016). Some of these associations pursue advocacy and entrepreneurship. Sometimes these associations respond to immigrants’ need to come together in order to face exclusion, rejection, racism, and discrimination in the host society (Babis 2016). They also serve as an entry point into U.S. civil society (Smyth 2017). Their main goal is the modernization of their communities of origin. As this modernization implies the construction of infrastructure, HTAs also look to establish political links in order to get economic and bureaucratic support to complete these projects. The execution of specific social welfare programs for migrants’ communities of origin gives them a sense of legitimacy and recognition in their home countries, which counteracts the aforementioned rejection and discrimination they sometimes encounter in the host country (Babis, 2016).

Likewise, one of the main raison d’être of these associations is to promote mutual assistance and socialization among migrants in the host country (FitzGerald 2008). The promotion of Mexican cultural values to U.S.-born generations (Fox and Bada 2008) also becomes a main purpose of these associations, although not always intentionally.

Some of these associations are explicitly created to pursue professional objectives such as bringing together potential partners within an industrial sector. But oftentimes, they also become sport and social clubs.

As previously stated, these associations may also pursue political objectives such as creating a collective response to stricter or more inflexible immigration policies in their destination societies. For example, oftentimes HTAs have played an important role in creating “safe spaces for the civic and political activation of undocumented immigrants” (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010, p. 165). This political role is not exclusive of HTAs; many other associations gain significant political empowerment and become political actors due to their ability to interact with multiple levels of the Mexican government and eventually with U.S. government officials as well (Vonderlack-Navarro and Sites, 2015). An example of such associations is Hermandad Mexicana Nacional, initially formed in the 1970s to create a stronger sense of community among first generation Mexican immigrants. With time, the scope of this association went beyond making newcomers feel welcome and aiding in their integration; it currently offers legal aid and also serves as an interest group that constantly
interacts with their legal representatives. Hermandad Mexicana Nacional is present in multiple cities across the U.S., with its largest impact and direct policy influence in the state of California.

The goals of these associations and the kinds of activities they undertake are greatly determined by their available economic resources, members’ preferences, and their organizational structures (Orozco and Welle, 2006). An association’s objectives may also shift in response to a triggering event (such as a natural disaster) in the home community. In sum, the aims of these associations are greatly determined by the context surrounding immigrants at both the sending and receiving societies. Table 1 showcases different kinds of migrant associations formed by Mexican immigrants living in the U.S.
### Table 1. Mexican Associations, Various Interests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization Name</th>
<th>Date of Creation</th>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Affiliate Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicanos Por La Causa</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Providing support in areas related to health and human services, education, and economic development.</td>
<td>High-skilled, educated Chicano professionals in legal, economic, and business areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican American Business &amp; Professional Association</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Engaging the Mexican community in the U.S. in creating sustainable businesses and participating in local stakeholder engagement.</td>
<td>Medium-high-skilled, medium-high education entrepreneurs, business owners, and employees of national and international businesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federación de Clubes Unidos de Zacatecas en Illinois</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Promoting heritage education and proliferation, support, and guidance to fellow Zacatecas (originally started as an HTA).</td>
<td>Zacatecan immigrants of all professions residing in Illinois.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asociación de Empresarios Mexicanos</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Strengthening ties and promoting synergy maximization through a network of Mexican businessmen and professionals.</td>
<td>High-skilled, educated businessmen, entrepreneurs and/or professionals. Ages range from early 20s to late 60s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin Fronteras</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Contributing to the promotion and protection of Mexican immigrants' human rights through influencing policymaking and supporting program development.</td>
<td>Low skilled, low education immigrants (documented and undocumented).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instituto de Mexicanos en el Exterior</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Promoting strategies and programs aimed at raising the living standards of Mexicans living abroad.</td>
<td>Medium-high-skilled, medium-high education entrepreneurs, business owners, business executives, and employees of national and international businesses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Global MX</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Redefining the concept of &quot;brain drain&quot; and refocusing on creating a global network of high-skilled Mexican professionals.</td>
<td>Medium-high-skilled, medium-high education entrepreneurs, business owners, and business executives from various industries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coalition of Mexican Immigrants</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Voicing Mexican immigrants' needs in terms of U.S. migration policy, influencing its scope toward better advocacy of immigrants' rights.</td>
<td>Medium-high-skilled, highly educated Mexican professionals, academics, and students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraternidad Sinaloense</td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Hometown Association dedicated to unifying the Sinaloan community in Los Angeles, CA., through cultural exchange and events aimed at gathering financial aid for Sinaloa.</td>
<td>Sinaloan immigrants of all professions residing in Los Angeles, CA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexicanos en Miami</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Promoting social and professional networking through cultural exchanges and events designed to strengthen Mexican migrants' ties within the city of Miami.</td>
<td>Mexican-origin migrants residing in Miami.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The aim of this table is to illustrate the various Mexican migrant associations in the U.S., focusing on hometown associations as well as cultural, social, and professional organizations. The selection criteria was based on the overall aim of the associations as well as their size (500+ members). This table does not intend to be a complete list, given the large number of Mexican immigrant associations registered in the U.S.

Source: Author
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Operational Structures of Migrant Associations

Migrant associations tend to start as informal and voluntary social groups of family members and friends who share a common identity and/or goal (e.g., soccer clubs, prayer groups, rotating savings and credit associations, cultural groups, mutual aid societies, etc.). Later, these groups evolve into formal organizations with more hierarchical structures, or they scale-up and become federations, which unite associations to attain a much higher bargaining power. Different federations that come together in U.S. metropolitan areas emerge as confederations (Fox, Selee, and Bada 2006). In contrast, some migrant associations start small, unstable, and eventually disappear.

Orozco and Lapointe (2004) refer to the cohesive structure of most migrant associations, which facilitates basic group discussion and decision-making, and allows them to adapt to changing circumstances. In fact, these associations maintain implicit norms of reciprocity, social trust, and moral obligation (Mercado, 2015), which make their structures more solid. The complexity and breadth of the projects these associations have undertaken during the last decades portrays their consolidated organizational structure. Moreover, such structure has allowed many of these organizations to establish ties with state governmental allies in both Mexico and the U.S. (Vonderlack-Navarro and Sites 2015), and become more institutionalized and consequently more autonomous (Hazan 2006).

In the specific case of HTAs, some have a hierarchical structure while others rely on mutual collaboration (Andrade-Eekhoff 1997, as cited in Orozco and Welle 2006). These structures coexist with other informal migrant networks. The organizational structure of many of these associations is totally or partially reliant on volunteers. An HTA’s structure largely depends on a combination of two main criteria: level of government engagement and level of community involvement. Based on the combination of these two criteria, Duquette-Rury (2016) has proposed four kinds of structures or “conceptual dimensions”: synergetic (high government engagement and community involvement), corporatist (high government engagement, low community involvement), fragmented (low government engagement and community involvement), and substitutive (high community involvement, low government engagement). Most HTAs have committees in their home country communities, which are in charge of monitoring and following up on specific projects (Orozco and Lapointe 2004). One of the main characteristics of HTAs is that because they consult with the communities in their countries of origin and with the local government in the selection of projects, they contribute to increased equality in migrants' places of origin in the long run (Duquette-Rury and Bada 2013). In other words, the social status of migrants and the community who stayed at the home country tend to correspond since both groups have a word regarding the identification of the most urgent projects for the community. Another particular trait of HTAs' organizational structure is the large role local government authorities play within them, which has increased significantly since 2002 when the 3x1 Program was launched in Mexico (Duquette-Rury and Bada 2013).

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4 The 3X1 Program for Migrants is a governmental program that matches the financial contributions of HTAs three (federal, state, and municipal governments) to one (the sponsoring migrant association).
fact, many of these associations revised their organizational structures in order obtain matching funds from the program, including electing officers, writing a constitution, and forming parallel local clubs in Mexico, with rules in place to renew the election process every three years (Mattiace and Fortuny Loret de Mola, 2015).

Nonetheless, some HTAs still need to evolve in terms of their overall structure. For example, some are not yet established as nonprofits in the U.S. (Orozco and Lapointe 2004).

In the case of civic associations, their structure is largely dependent on the purpose for which they were formed. Civic associations with cultural scopes are mostly led by committees made up of community leaders. Associations whose scope is to promote legal advocacy or to influence policy are more likely to be hierarchical, with appointed cabinet members serving specific terms. Such is the case of Immigrantes Unidos, a Colorado-based association composed of pro-immigrant advocates of Hispanic origin. Its organizational structure comprises a board of directors that delegates strategic decisions regarding the organization, and individual committees that directly oversee each of the organization’s aims (education, immigration, culture, health, etc). These organizations rely for the most part on voluntary financial contributions from their members and communities through fundraising events. The Fiesta de Independencia Foundation, aimed at raising funds for scholarships to Mexican-Hispanic students, actively organizes fundraising events such as golf tournaments to sustain the organization and its activities. A few other associations apply for external grants, and most apply for nonprofit status (Hazan 2006). Such is the case of the Regional Organization of Oaxaca, a California-based, community-sustained association created by first generation Mexican immigrants from Oaxaca in 1988 whose scope was, and still is, to preserve and promote Oaxacan customs and traditions within the Mexican migrant community, while exposing them to the mainstream community.

As previously stated, migrant associations’ organizational structures are determined to a great extent by whether they are immigrant-founded or Mexican American-founded. In the first case, meetings tend to be more informal, conducted in Spanish, and held in members’ homes, whereas in the second case they are conducted in English and take place in organizational offices (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010).

**Member Profiles**

The profile of Mexican migrant association members differs, ranging from members with a low level of educational attainment and limited English proficiency to highly educated members who have mastered English. They are workers, intellectuals, businessmen, and politicians, among others (Cano and Délano 2004). Most of them could be categorized as small business owners or professionals who hold U.S. citizenship or at least permanent residency. Thus, they tend to be settled immigrants who have the time and interest in voicing and questioning what happens in both their home and host countries (Hazan 2006). Some association members, particularly those in HTAs who are not in leadership roles, are undocumented migrants, although recently their participation in such organizations has declined because of the fear created by deportation raids. Membership in these associations tends to provide migrants a sense of empowerment (oftentimes to deal with
societal stereotypes and discrimination) regardless of their socioeconomic status (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010).

A distinctive characteristic of migrant associations is that they are mainly led by male first-generation immigrants. This is relevant, firstly because the involvement and active participation in these associations among second-generation immigrants is not the same; they do not show interest in keeping transnational links, at least not with the same intensity as their parents (Escala-Rabadán, Bada and Rivera Salgado 2006), which jeopardizes the long-term viability of these migrant associations. Secondly, because most of these associations continue to be led by men, the participation of women remains weak.

Most of the first-generation leaders of these associations are naturalized U.S. citizens or have permanent residence status, and many of them have their own businesses (Escala-Rabadán, Bada and Rivera Salgado 2006; Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010). Furthermore, they tend to be more pragmatic and have an entrepreneurial mindset. Most of them are married, and are in their 40s. In contrast, those immigrants who act as social service providers within some associations tend to be more idealistic and base their work on the adoption of U.S. multiculturalism (Mattiace and Fortuny Loret de Mola 2015).

Due to the differences in terms of education levels, the occupations of the members of migrant associations is divided into manual laborers and professional business owners, and most of them have been living in the U.S. for 10 years or more (Portes and Zhou 2012). In general, as Portes and Zhou (2012) state, “organizations are consistently supported by older, better-educated, and more established migrants in their communities” (p. 200).

The transnational activities of these leaders and some members are facilitated by their profile since, as stated above, most of them are established migrants in the U.S. who have U.S. citizenship or are legal residents. They also have a stable economic situation, which allows them to perform a circular migration between Mexico and the U.S. (Fox and Bada 2008). Their involvement in transnational activities is also linked to a stronger likelihood of participating in local politics and other civic associations in the U.S. (Portes, Escobar, and Arana 2008; Escobar 2007, as cited in Portes and Zhou 2012). Membership in such associations does not conflict with their migrant identity since most of them perceive themselves as simultaneously being part of both Mexican and American societies (Duquette-Rury and Bada 2013).

As mentioned before, members' profiles differ according to the kind of associations to which they belong. In the case of civic associations, such as business groups, members tend to have a high level of education, are proficient in English, and belong to the upper middle income class in Mexico. They typically arrive legally to the U.S., and they embrace a dual identity (Mexican and American) (Hazan 2006). Another distinctive characteristic is that whereas members of HTAs become leaders for the first time through their involvement in the association, it is common that members of civic organizations have occupied leadership positions in the past in other settings or contexts, thus they are able to more effectively articulate and advance their interests within these civic associations (Hazan 2006).

The diverse profile of the migrants who join these associations impact the groups’ organizational structures since elite migrants tend to be more selective about the groups.
they interact with compared to traditional low-skilled migrants whose associations deal with class or racial diversity (Mercado 2015).

**Association Activities**

The activities performed by migrant associations greatly differ depending on their goals and the profiles of their members. Some associations assist migrants in basic areas such as education, legal services, welfare services, and information on available job or business opportunities (Somerville, Durana and Terrazas 2008). Others play a social role by linking migrants with co-ethnics and/or the mainstream community through organized dances, picnics, raffles, beauty pageants, and other cultural events (López, Escala-Rabadan, and Hinojosa-Ojeda 2001). Others offer members the possibility to find business partners. Still others play a political role, either intentionally (e.g., when associations launch to support a specific political cause), or unintentionally (e.g., by having a common goal that gives members a unique collective voice that otherwise would not be heard by migrants acting on an individual basis). Oftentimes, this political role may imply the endorsement of specific laws or lobbying campaigns for political rights. Additionally, some associations organize conferences, talks, and discussion groups to foster greater political consciousness (Hazan 2006).

In terms of HTAs, their main role is philanthropic, as they raise funds to support the construction of public infrastructure (roads, bridges, parks, churches, schools, health care clinics, sports facilities, and streets) in their home communities, and to support the implementation of social projects such as health care clinics, child care centers, and convalescent homes for the elderly (López, Escala-Rabadan, and Hinojosa-Ojeda 2001).

Even though most of the associations do not have the economic and physical capacity (in terms of infrastructure) to offer specific services to migrants, they play a prominent role in capturing and disseminating information about where and how migrants may access these services. Furthermore, they can act as the bridge between migrants and governmental bodies in their home countries, such as consulates that can educate migrants on different kinds of available services like health or legal assistance, vocational training, etc.

Migrant associations play another relevant implicit role, which is not part of their declared formal activities—namely, empowering their members, especially those who face a more vulnerable situation due to their migration status or education level (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010).

Migrant associations have also gained visibility in the host country. Many of them have gone beyond their communities of origin in Mexico to participate in U.S.-based civic associations (Duquette-Rury and Bada 2013), which organize events featuring intellectuals, politicians, and opinion leaders from Mexico and the U.S. Similarly, migrant associations seek to advance a specific political agenda in both countries.
Association Links

Through these various associations, migrants not only establish social and emotional links with their communities of origin but also impact local economies in the host country (Duquette-Rury 2016; Orozco and Welle 2006), and link one locality to another (Somerville, Durana and Terrazas 2008). The links migrants create among themselves and with their communities result in donations, investment, trade and tourism, and institutional support (Orozco and Welle 2006). The formation of migrant associations is thus a clear example of transnationalism.

These associations maintain links with different stakeholders, particularly the three levels of government in Mexico but also with the U.S. government. In fact, associations have become useful intermediaries between the U.S. government and the Mexican immigrant community (Hazan 2006). Moreover, migrant associations cultivate links with nongovernmental organizations, donors and foundations, local unions, international labor associations, pro-immigrant rights organizations, and the private sector.

Of particular importance are the links established with the local community in the home country (stay-at-home community members), since they are the expected recipients of the benefits generated by the productive projects the associations pursue; many times, they contribute to the implementation of projects by providing funds or unpaid community labor (Fox and Bada 2008). Thus, the members of the home country community cannot be considered passive people who simply accept any proposal, but rather are active players of each project who can provide valuable input since they are totally familiarized with the local context and the most urgent needs to be solved (Duquette-Rury 2016). As Duquette-Rury (2016) explains, “migrant membership status in a social collective is complex, and without building meaningful bridges to social elites and residents, making claims in the name of the community reinforces political inequalities between migrants and non-migrants and magnifies distrust in the political process” (p. 786). The local non-migrant community plays a vital role in making transnational projects successful, since these individuals are able to monitor projects’ advancement on a daily basis, and they persuade the whole community to contribute, either economically or through their work, to the projects’ completion. In fact, as Donnelly (2010, in Bada et al. 2010) states, understanding the transnational identity of migrants has become a prerequisite for successful civic engagement.

Most of these associations foster the creation of bridges with other organizations. As Mercado (2015) states, they “execute projects, make connections, and establish relationships of dialogue and understanding” (p. 250). Links with other migrant associations, nonprofit organizations, political representatives, specific political parties, scholars, and community-based organizations allow these associations to push certain initiatives in the host country, including the passage of bills that benefit vulnerable groups such as undocumented migrants or the so-called Dreamers. Oftentimes, local institutions in the host country like churches, labor unions, political leaders, and business networks play an important role in facilitating migrants’ entry into U.S. civic and political life (Bada et al. 2010). Many of these institutions are established by non-immigrant allies.
It is worth mentioning that despite a contentious relationship between Mexican immigrants and Mexican-American organizations, their leaders have recognized that they need to work together on many causes to advance their goals, mainly political ones (Hazan 2006). Moreover, despite their different aims, some of these associations have created synergies to collaborate on specific projects, and some HTAs have made alliances with more prominent U.S.-based Latino groups (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010).

As mentioned before, some of these associations have not only established links with specific political parties in the U.S. but also in Mexico, where some of them implicitly support the agenda of certain political candidates.

**Impact of Association Activities**

The results of migrant associations’ activities depend on different criteria such as the individual dynamics within the organization (e.g., level of engagement by members), community involvement, the degree to which their activities correspond to local needs in the home country, and the amount of leverage they have with the home government.

According to Cano and Délano (2004), migrant organizations “have been key for the government’s policy responses to Mexicans abroad because they provide channels for aid, they voice the community’s demands, and they exercise pressure over the authorities” (p. 24). To a certain extent, this pressure has materialized in increasing accountability and demand for transparency by the Mexican government, particularly from HTAs participating in the 3x1 Program.

Positive results of these associations are evident in both the home and host countries. Many of the activities by formal migrant associations have been well perceived not only by the members of the home country communities but also by both the sending and receiving governments, who have realized that many of the projects have a long-term benefit for the communities involved. Additionally, many of these projects have contributed to reducing inequality between rural and urban areas through the construction of infrastructure such as churches, main squares, and sport facilities (Escala-Rabadán, Bada and Rivera Salgado 2006), which are both functional and visually appealing.

An often overlooked positive impact of these associations is how they cultivate migrants' civic involvement on a wider scale (Somerville, Durana and Terrazas 2008). This is particularly relevant since oftentimes Mexicans, regardless of their socioeconomic status, do not involve themselves in civic activities in their home country. Moreover, these associations give voice to community members who are oftentimes ignored; thus, in words of Fox and Bada (2008), they have a “civic spillover effect.” They become an inclusion tool. In fact, these associations have been able to blur the boundaries between documented and undocumented migrants, providing the latter with a sense of belonging (Minian 2017). Interestingly, these associations also promote cross-class interaction, encouraging a sense of “Mexicanness” among members despite their socioeconomic differences, and bringing together diverse ethnic populations from Mexico (Minian 2017).
The positive results HTAs have achieved in their communities of origin in some cases have also prompted active political participation by migrants who return to Mexico to occupy different positions in state congresses. Duquette-Rury (2016) refers to the democratizing effect HTAs have when they demand higher political standards from authorities and foster government accountability (Burgess 2005; Bada 2014, as cited in Duquette-Rury 2016). Bada (2016) states that migrant associations gain such important bargaining power that they may even shape the use of remittances and, consequently, productive projects. Furthermore, the associations’ actions have also increased interest from state governments in extending the scope of their support to migrants in the host country in different areas not previously considered such as health, education, and job training. Mayors of some states have also demonstrated more interest in visiting their countrymen in the U.S. (Escala-Rabadán, Bada, and Rivera Salgado 2006).

From the U.S. perspective, as previously stated, the existence of such associations provides immigrants with a new sense of belonging, which is particularly important to immigrants who often feel alienated from mainstream society (Escala-Rabadán, Bada, and Rivera Salgado 2006). These associations offer migrants the possibility of increasing their civic and even political participation in the U.S. In this sense, Somerville, Durana and Terrazas (2008) recognize the value of these associations as networks that provide economic, moral, and practical (language classes, advise on employment and housing, etc.) support to new immigrants. An association highlighting these qualities is Hermandad Mexicana Nacional (HMN), which offers workshops that address issues pertaining to new immigrants, from how to scan the market for housing and avoid predatory contracts to how to formalize a business as a non-U.S.-citizen, how to apply for scholarships, among other subjects. HMN also organizes networking events that help integrate local communities and highlight potential synergies between members. There is also an increasing likelihood that migrants who actively participate in the development of their home communities also get involved in U.S. society and politics (de la Garza and Hazán 2003; DeSipio 2011; Portes, Escobar, and Arana 2008, as cited in Mattiace and Fortuny Loret de Mola 2015).

However, some academics have expressed concern about how migrant associations may jeopardize migrants’ integration into the receiving society. On the contrary, experts in transnational migration such as Portes and Zhou (2012) negate this concern, noting that there is a strong pro-integrationist stance in immigrant organizations. This explains why the U.S. government perceives the existence of these associations in a positive manner and in some cases even supports them.

The main challenges these associations face can be classified in three different categories: funding, organizational, and capacity (Somerville, Durana, and Terrazas 2008). For example, as previously mentioned, most of these associations rely on the financial contributions of their members. In terms of organizational issues, oftentimes they do not have a formal structure or they have a very hierarchical structure, which impedes agile decision-making. As for their capacity, one recurrent problem with HTAs is that volunteers leading specific productive projects generally do not have expertise or training in executing them (Orozco and Garcia-Zanello 2009). Researchers have also documented the adverse conditions faced by HTAs compared to Latino ethnic and civil rights organizations...
or white, mainstream organizations (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010). These difficult circumstances include instances of discrimination as well as poor access to funding and lack of expertise, at least at the start of their operations.

Another challenge is the emergence of many different migrant associations, which creates fierce competition among them in obtaining resources and establishing their legitimacy.

HTAs also must overcome mistrust from members of the local community in their home country when trying to garner involvement in new projects and initiatives. They oftentimes also lack a sense of solidarity even within the association (López, Escala-Rabadan, and Hinojosa-Ojeda 2001). The San Bernardino Community Center, a nonprofit organization in San Bernardino, California, has overcome this hurdle by gaining recognition from the U.S. Department of Justice, because of the quality of their advocacy toward immigrant rights. This recognition has helped foster the community’s trust in the legal guidance they provide regarding subjects such as DACA, applying for permanent residency, among others. Another key factor that helps provide legitimacy to the San Bernardino Community Center is the fact that many of its collaborators provide aid on a volunteer basis. In the already mentioned case of the Regional Organization of Oaxaca, the association leverages its cultural roots and heritage to promote a sense of trust not only with older generations of immigrants but new ones as well.

From a political standpoint, associations, particularly HTAs, may fall into the trap of political patronage. Governmental authorities, mainly at the municipal level, may condition economic support for a specific HTA productive project on the “purchase” of electoral votes. A different but related situation is the fact that the increasing bargaining power migrant organizations have over different governmental levels (again, mainly the municipal level) may lead to the execution of projects that oftentimes do not align with the real needs of the home community, since migrants may perceive a different reality from abroad (Bada 2016). A positive result of migrant associations highlighted previously was the reduction of inequity in the distribution of power within home community members, but some academics have questioned this viewpoint, stating that the increased bargaining power of migrant organizations itself stimulates an unequal power dynamic with the local communities (Bada 2016). The situation in terms of political patronage for associations other than HTAs is different since they are not subject to an official and formalized economic contribution from the home government; rather, they finance their own projects or establish specific alliances with the home government for specific projects. It is likely that some associations support some local home governments over others according to their ideological coincidence, but rarely do they engage in political patronage.

A relevant challenge is that, as mentioned above, most of these associations are led by first-generation migrants, which makes it difficult to convince subsequent generations to get involved in association projects, and to train new members who could expand these projects and give them continuity. Furthermore, some of these associations portray a clear difference between the aims, and consequently the results, of first- and second-generation immigrants since the former privilege transnational activities whereas the latter fight against discrimination in the U.S. and concentrate their efforts on migrants’ health and incorporation into U.S. society (Mattiace and Fortuny Loret de Mola 2015).
For all types of associations, a challenge is attaining the socioeconomic indicators needed for optimal integration and political participation in the host country (Donnelly, 2010 in Bada et al., 2010). Such indicators include the number of migrants who have benefitted from the association annually, the annual number of social programs undertaken, and the amount raised through donations or monetary contributions of members.

Due to these challenges, the academic and political discussion about the influence of these associations is contentious (as is analysis on the impact of remittances). Some researchers claim that even though associations contribute to alleviating poverty in the short run, they do not facilitate sustainable development. This difficulty is due to the fact that long-term sustainable productive projects have to be supported by a solid innovation structure, which ideally must be fostered by the government along with major private players. Nonetheless, Somerville, Durana, and Terrazas (2008) contend that analyzing the impact of migrant associations from a mere developmental approach is a myopia since these associations have other significant, less evident contributions, as discussed in previous sections.

Policy Implications

Public policies can determine the trajectory of migrant associations (Somerville, Durana and Terrazas 2008). During previous federal governments in Mexico, which actively supported these associations, concrete public policies were undertaken such as the well-known 3x1 Program for Migrants. In fact, this program has been one of the most concrete attempts to institutionalize a governmental effort to join synergies with the migrant community. It is worth recognizing that this program has had significant weaknesses. For example, the Mexican government has been criticized for using the program to try to share the burden of infrastructure maintenance and development with migrants (Bada 2016), and for the program’s contribution to increasing inequality (Smyth 2017). Nonetheless, it is risky to say the least to cancel this kind of program instead of addressing its weaknesses. Through input from migrants and from the stay-at-home community, it is feasible to implement projects with long-term benefits instead of simply perpetuating the use of remittances for consumption purposes with an ephemeral effect. Moreover, the lack of continuity in supporting these initiatives can significantly damage the results attained and force the players involved to start from scratch. This damage could be revealed not only in terms of an economic opportunity cost but also in terms of the loss of bargaining power and legitimacy migrants have acquired through their membership in these associations.

Up to now, the Mexican government has adopted a proactive role in the transnational field (Portes and Zhou 2012). The current government should continue these efforts not only to reach the diaspora community (mainly in the U.S.) but also to strengthen links with them in order to potentiate synergies and implement productive projects. It would then be valuable to examine these previous experiences to learn from them and replicate successful strategies. The implementation of efficient infrastructure and social (mainly education-related) projects has significantly stimulated the creation of formal migrant associations and ultimately facilitated the execution of transnational initiatives. Nonetheless, policies must not be limited to economic support, but should also foster the involvement of other stakeholders in order to provide guidance and technical assistance, the lack of which
sometimes prevents the execution of collective productive investments in local towns (López, Escala-Rabada, and Hinojosa-Ojeda 2001). This has to be reinforced by the construction of complementary infrastructure and adequate ecological conditions, which keep these projects sustainable.

To foster transnational activities among migrants, it is important that the home state government reach out to migrant associations. This approach could encourage Mexican migrants to start a business back home or to invest in a home community project. Likewise, contacting migrants can simply inspire them to vacation in their states of origin instead of going abroad (FitzGerald 2008).

The existence of so many migrant associations has a positive effect in terms of gaining visibility and legitimacy to pursue some feasible and beneficial projects. However, the coexistence of many associations, which oftentimes pursue very similar goals, may lead to the dispersion of valuable efforts. Thus, the creation of public policies that would bring together different migration players such as the government, associations, and non-governmental organizations can significantly improve the implementation of specific productive projects. Furthermore, keeping track of formal migrant associations registered in both the communities of origin and the U.S. can assist stakeholders in identifying viable investment prospects, sharing best practices, providing technical support, and increasing projects’ accountability (Fox and Bada 2008).

The development of public policies around migrant associations should not be conceived only from a home-country approach, since this would be a myopic approximation. Destination countries must understand that the development projects executed by these associations improve the quality of life in the communities of origin, which in the long term creates the conditions to reduce necessity-driven migration. Furthermore, these associations have a significant impact on migrants’ integration in the host country, playing sometimes even an educational role in terms of civic behavior.

Efforts to stop migration from Mexico to the U.S. seem ineffective due to the complexity of this phenomenon, in terms of its causes and implications. Migration should not be analyzed solely from a simple remittances perspective but also from a developmental one, which implies a circular migration of talented and experienced people whose contributions to the home country can be significant (Portes and Zhou 20129). However, public policies should not take for granted this circular mobility but keep in mind that efforts should be primarily conducted around strategic issues such as alleviating poverty and generating well-paying jobs in rural communities (Bada 2016) to reduce necessity-driven migration and eventually stop it.

From the associations’ perspective, it is important to rethink the significant role associations can play as institutional intermediaries or lobbyists between the Mexican and U.S. governments (FitzGerald 2008).
Conclusion

Although the discussion about associations being a mechanism of assimilation in the host country or a vehicle for maintaining homeland ties continues (FitzGerald, 2008), it is clear the influence that migrant associations have on civic participation, policy formulation, and binational cooperation in both Mexico and the U.S.

The new political approach of the Mexican government of cutting expenses drastically affects not only the domestic population but also Mexican migrants in the U.S. in two different broad ways. First, and maybe the most unfortunate consequence, is the risk that the transnational advancements attained during the last three decades (HTA involvement in infrastructure development, political activism, providing social shelter to migrants, etc.) could be lost if the current government keeps to a minimum the resources destined to communicate and cultivate a close relationship with the Mexican diaspora in the U.S. The other negative effect is the opportunity cost derived from losing the possibility of attracting investment from migrants to their home country, or preventing the likelihood that migrants will share experiences and best practices with their communities of origin.

The preservation and necessary intensification of transnational activities with the Mexican diaspora should not be considered from a mere social spending perspective but as the continuity of an investment. For this investment to be even more productive, the design of transnational projects must respond to the diversity of Mexican migrants in the U.S. In some cases, this effort should be aimed at improving the living conditions of the communities of origin, with the migrant community serving as a source of inspiration and as an interlocutor, but not as the main executor of projects in the municipality. In other cases, this effort should be aimed at strengthening the Mexican government’s relationship with migrants while they are living in the host country to make their expatriation less complex. Finally, with skilled and high-skilled migrants such as entrepreneurs, scientists, and academicians, spaces to exchange best practices, facilitate potential business opportunities with other Mexicans, and foster academic reflection will have to be created. Developing this transnational country-individual link is complex and expensive, but creating it on a country-association basis is feasible and productive.
References


Migrant Associations: A Valuable Bridge Between Mexico and Its Diaspora


