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My Family, My Roots, My Future

KEY FINDINGS FROM A STUDY ON ALTERNATIVES TO MIGRATION FOR YOUTH IN THE GUATEMALAN WESTERN HIGHLANDS

Over the past seven years, northward migration from Central America has sharply increased. As the number of migrants grows, the profile of migrants has also shifted, with an increase in the number women, unaccompanied minors, and even entire families migrating north in search of asylum, better opportunities, and a more dignified life. As migrants' profiles shift, so too have the motivations and circumstances that drive people from their homes.

Previous studies demonstrate that the global pandemic and punitive measures such as U.S. border patrol and detention centers have had little impact on migratory intention. Therefore, ***we can address migration in a more effective and humane way by better understanding and investing in the factors that help people remain and thrive in their communities.*** In 2020, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) commissioned a study on the push and retention factors of migration in Guatemala. The study not only examined the causes that drive people to leave but also the factors that encourage them to stay in their communities.

Between 2021 and 2022 CRS commissioned a second study to Rafael Landívar University to delve into some of the factors that could promote rootedness—***the opportunity and desire to live and thrive in one's home community***—among youth. The study identified elements within the existing socioeconomic initiatives that provide alternatives to irregular migration, rooting young people in the Guatemalan Western Highlands to their communities. The study also took a closer look at the reality of young people, to better understand the factors that drive migration as well as those that promote permanence in the country.

The study was conducted in 18 municipalities in Quetzaltenango, San Marcos, Totonicapán, and Huehuetenango—a region characterized by high rates of out-migration. The municipalities are characterized by conditions of structural vulnerability that have the potential to trigger international migration among young people. Young people between the ages of 18 and 30 represent nearly a quarter of the total population in the selected municipalities.

WHAT REALITY DO YOUNG PEOPLE FACE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES?

The study found that youth face a variety of complex educational, socio-economic, political, community, and cultural challenges that directly affected their ability to fully develop in their communities of origin.

Gender Gaps

Youth identified gender gaps in nearly all spheres of their lives. Young women were educationally disadvantaged compared to men, assumed domestic responsibilities at an early age and faced the greatest difficulties in accessing jobs and decent wages. Of those interviewed, 41% have at least one child while the average age of having their first child is 20 years old. Women also face discrimination, *machismo*, and inequalities in cultural and community activities.

Educational Challenges

Most of the young people surveyed dropped out of school between the ages of 10 and 20 or never studied for mostly economic reasons, such as lack of money (53%) and the need to work (20%). The average age of school dropout was 13 years, which coincides with the end of primary school.

Socio-economic Challenges

Among the young people who worked or worked and studied (45%), only 4% had a formal employment contract. High levels of informality were combined with lack of work experience and inadequate levels of education. Furthermore, current jobs generated insufficient income, with 12% indicating some level of food insecurity. The study also identified a significant gender gap: 72% of men had income-earning work at the time of the survey, compared to 27% of women.

Political and Community Engagement

While the study showed low levels of political participation among youth - only 7% participated in a neighborhood committee and 5% in a political party or civic committee, community participation was much higher, with 42% participating in a religious or church group, 28% in a sports team, and 13% linked to cultural traditions or festivals.

The young people surveyed felt a strong attachment to their community; 97% expressed feeling proud of their roots and 92% indicated that they would miss their community if they had to migrate. The high levels of community participation reveal the importance and potential of community spaces in promoting youth participation while the study found an absence of institutional spaces that promote youth civic participation.

Rather than building those community and cultural ties, the study found that most local initiatives seek impact at the individual level. Youth expressed feeling excluded from existing initiatives, which are largely directed toward adults and focus on the economy or the fulfillment of basic needs. Agricultural initiatives were found to further reinforce gender roles and are generally not attractive for youth. Instead, youth expressed an aspiration to work in other sectors such as technology, commerce, tourism, services, and industry. They also expressed a need for psychosocial support as well as for opportunities that allow them to serve the community in a meaningful way, express their talents and interests (sports, arts, recreation) and provide a sense of belonging. Participants also expressed low levels of perception of violence and risk of disasters or climatic effects and identified key challenges including discrimination on ethnic grounds and gender. Finally, youth note that development initiatives were more successful when they were directed by and specifically for youth and were implemented in municipalities with youth-focused programs and policies.



Photo: Oscar Leiva/ Silverlight for CRS

“One stays in the kitchen or in agriculture.”

- female study participant, Aguacatán Guatemala

WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE INTEND TO MIGRATE?

Of the 755 young people (aged 18-30) surveyed (470 women and 285 men), 29% had an intention to migrate to another country within the next 12 months, of which 96% planned to go to the U.S. Migratory intention was higher among men; those who completed middle school; those working without a formal employment contract; and among those engaged in activities such as ranching, construction, and agriculture. Even though youth identified economic motivations for migrating, such as improving income and seeking job opportunities, further statistical analysis identified other variables associated with greater migratory intent, such as family reunification (5%), educational opportunities (3%) and family problems/violence (1%). Family support for migration increased the probability of migrating by more than 100%, followed by thinking about living abroad (73%), and having relatives or acquaintances in the U.S. (29-33%).

Why do young people intend to stay in their communities?

Despite significant driving factors of migration in communities, 7 out of 10 young people surveyed (71%) indicated an intention to stay. The data confirms the importance of family in the decision to migrate or stay. In 62% of cases, immobility was related to situations in the family environment—not wanting to leave family or not having parental authorization.

- 51% expressed that they did not want to be away from family.
- 22% indicated that they lacked the funds to migrate.
- 11% responded that they lacked parental authorization.

The study also showed that young people felt a strong attachment to their community of origin:

- 97% expressed feeling proud of their historical and ethnic roots.
- 92% indicated that they would miss their community a lot if they had to migrate.
- 86% indicated that their community was their favorite place to live.

Attachment to the family is a key retention factor

Further analysis indicated that community participation in religious groups and cultural traditions reduce the probability of migrating by 35% and 48%, respectively, as did land ownership (37%). Young people who reported having growth and development opportunities in their communities of origin—such as productive and commercial ventures, art, technology, services, and tourism—were 56% less likely to migrate, making having opportunities the variable with the greatest impact on retention. However, 41% recognized that they did not always find opportunities in their communities for economic and personal growth, which demonstrates that for **community and family attachment to function as retention factors, youth must also find opportunities for personal growth and development**. Based on the study results, CRS has developed programming recommendations to further promote rootedness of youth to their communities.

Main motivations to migrate

- Economic opportunity.
- Family support to migrate.
- Thinking about living abroad.
- Relatives or acquaintances living in the U.S.

Main motivations to stay

- Not wanting to be far from family.
- Lack of funds or parental authorization.
- Perceived opportunities for youth in the community.
- Community participation.
- Land ownership.

How to promote rootedness

- Work with families, forming ties and generating attachment.
- Increase initiatives designed and led by youth that reflect their aspirations.
- Promote economic activities that focus on youth interests in technology, commerce, tourism, services, and industry.
- Foster community participation in activities with cultural relevance.
- Support integrated programs, including psychosocial assistance and recreational and artistic activities.

A closer look at the young people who expressed an intention to stay revealed that immobility can be voluntary or involuntary.

- Approximately 42% intended to stay because of structural limitations in their capacity to move (“involuntary” or “forced immobility”), with 22% indicating that they lacked the funds to migrate and 11% that they did not have parental authorization.
- Approximately 58% were in a situation of “voluntary immobility”, because their motivations for remaining were related to an aspiration to stay; 51% of these youth expressed that they did not want to be far from family.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUTH PROGRAMMING

- 1. Strong family ties and family attachment can significantly impact the intention of youth to migrate.** International development agencies should focus programmatic efforts on the family unit, strengthening family integration and promoting family livelihoods that include an active role for youth.
- 2. Youth are most eager to participate in initiatives that they lead and that reflect their aspirations.** To achieve the greatest acceptance by youth, initiatives should integrate a positive youth development framework, ensuring youth participation in program design and ongoing youth governance during implementation, such as through youth advisory councils.
- 3. Youth aspire to work beyond the agriculture production sector.** Economic activities should focus on the youth interests in technology, commerce, services, and industry. In agricultural initiatives, efforts should intentionally link youth to relevant steps in the value chain.
- 4. Community participation, especially in leadership and decision-making spaces, fosters youth engagement.** To increase programmatic outcomes, development programs should prioritize capacity strengthening in youth leadership and working with communities to include youth in decision-making spaces, such as local development committees and cultural and religious leadership organizations.
- 5. Economic opportunity is only part of the solution. Young people seek integrated programs that include elements such as psychosocial support and recreational and artistic activities.** Programs should not only provide youth with economic opportunities but also motivate and inspire them through activities that help them manage their emotions, address discrimination, and connect with their cultural identity.
- 6. Development programs for youth should examine, challenge, and seek to transform inequitable gender structures** by not only encouraging female participation but actively addressing the factors that foster gender inequalities as an integral part of program development, with a focus on building female leadership.
- 7. Robustly investing in communities of origin** is the central factor to overcome high levels of poverty and low levels of human development and provide youth with an opportunity and desire to live and thrive in their home community.

Study Methodology

- The study was conducted between July 2021 and September 2022 in 18 municipalities in 4 departments.
- A broad theoretical framework was used that considered both factors involved in the decision to migrate and factors that influenced the decision to stay.
- Information was gathered through a questionnaire with 755 youth aged 18-30 and through 22 focus groups and 62 individual, semi-structured interviews with 181 youth and key informants from 15 municipalities.
- The questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews collected information on migratory intent, potential push and retention factors, and local initiatives for youth.
- A probabilistic linear econometric model was developed to identify variables that influence migratory intention.

CRS is applying this information to improve humanitarian and development programming and counts on the support of the international cooperation to ensure evidence-based and effective resource investment to prevent forced migration in Central America.

"I have decided to stay here because I would love to help others, because if we leave then who will start a process to help others..."

- CRS western highland project participant



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