

## **Crisis in the Mexican Countryside: Lessons for Regional Integration**

Deeply-rooted popular discontent with Mexico's aggressive pursuit of free market reforms has exploded to the forefront of the country's political scene in recent months, as small farmers and campesino organizations mount a fiery public campaign to pressure their government to address the collapse of the country's agricultural sector. A movement of small farmer and peasant associations calling itself *El Campo no aguanta más* ("The Countryside can't take it anymore") has demanded that the Mexican Senate declare a moratorium on the agricultural chapter of NAFTA, and that President Fox subsequently renegotiate that section of the trade agreement. Focusing on the issue of food sovereignty, leaders of the coalition of campesino groups and other small-farmer associations characterize their country's rapidly increasing dependence on foreign (mostly U.S.) imports of basic foodstuffs such as rice, beans, wheat, and sorghum as a threat to national security. They also assert that the environmental, cultural, and social benefits of small farms in Mexico – which have been overlooked by political leaders who view these farms as economically inefficient - are essential to the well being of the nation. In a letter to Congress, these leaders asserted that "to save the countryside in this difficult time is to save Mexico."

The campesino and small farmer movement has generated significant political and public discussion regarding the crisis in the countryside. *El Campo no aguanta más*, El Barzón, Congreso Agrario Permanente (CAP), and other small farmer coalitions have organized massive marches throughout the country; blockades along international bridges to stop agricultural imports from entering Mexico, a hunger strike at the Angel of Independence monument, and a 100,000-person march on January 31 in Mexico City.

### **Mexico's Rural Crisis**

The large turnouts at demonstrations testify to the tremendous economic and social pressure exerted on Mexico's rural populations in recent years. *El Campo no aguanta más* and other campesino leaders have amassed an array of statistics which illuminate the severity of the crisis in the countryside. The statistics paint a dire picture of rural Mexico:

- In 1992, 35-36% of Mexico's rural population was considered to live in a state of "food poverty," that is, earning less than the minimum amount needed for food. Today, that number is 52.4%. (*El Campo no aguanta más*: statistics on the countryside)
- Since NAFTA went into effect, the price of a basic basket of foodstuffs and household goods has risen by 257%. (*El Campo no aguanta más*: statistics on the countryside)
- 1,780,000 jobs have been lost in the Mexican countryside since 1994. (Estudio Situación del campo mexicano, investigadores de la Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo)

- 700,000 people are expected to lose their jobs in Mexican agriculture and food sector this year. (NY Times, 12/19/02)

The economic transformations illustrated by these statistics have generated a more intangible process of social disintegration in rural Mexico. The most powerful evidence of this process is the rapid rate at which small farmers and their families are leaving their communities; the Mexican Secretary for Social Development (SEDESOL) estimates that 600 campesinos leave their land each day. Behind this figure is a harsh reality felt by nearly all of country's rural residents: no one seems to believe in a future for the Mexican countryside.

The inevitable outcome of this loss of hope is mass displacement of rural residents, to urban areas in Mexico and, increasingly, to the U.S. According to Rodolfo Turian Gutierrez, Mexican Subsecretary for Social Development, 96% of Mexico's 2,443 municipalities send some migrants to the U.S. each year (*La Jornada*, January 24, 2003). Even President Fox, a proponent of free-market reforms and ardent NAFTA defender, commented in an AP interview that he wanted to talk with President Bush regarding the need to minimize the impacts of U.S. farm subsidies on Mexican producers. Otherwise, he commented, "What you'll have is more migration." ([www.nadir.org](http://www.nadir.org), Nov. 17, 2002)

### **Binational Integration: Need for a new approach**

Eight years after NAFTA's implementation, the economies and societies of Mexico and the U.S. are more deeply intertwined than ever. Unfortunately, the domestic and international policies that should regulate these deepening relationships have proven inadequate and misguided. Artificially low prices on U.S. taxpayer-subsidized agricultural imports are driving small Mexican farmers off their land and northward toward agricultural and service jobs in the United States. Significant portions of the wages these migrants earn in the U.S., in turn, are sent back to their families in Mexico, where remittances have become the only remaining source of investment in the countryside. Rural development expert Armando Bartra has noted that the \$10-11 billion in remittances Mexico receives each year is equivalent to the amount the country spends annually to import food from abroad. (*La Jornada*, January 12, 2003) That figure is nearly triple the budget of SAGARPA, the Mexican Department of Agriculture.

Migration and the money sent home by migrants working in the U.S. constitute a central element of the deepening Mexico-U.S. relationship, but there are no bi-national policy mechanisms in place to manage this phenomenon, nor to help displaced workers live dignified lives on either side of the border. The scant human mobility provisions in NAFTA, which consist of expedited visa options for a few classes of business-people and technical workers, do not represent a serious effort to develop a new framework for governing bi-national migration flows in the context of an evolving regional economic reality. Rather, the NAFTA provisions are best understood as a means of advancing NAFTA's central goal of facilitating the movement of capital and promoting investment

across national borders. Although it appeared that Mexico and the United States were moving toward some kind of migration accord in early 2001, that process had already stalled by the end of that summer and was effectively halted after September 11, 2001. At the same time, the economic pressures that provoke migration continue to mount.

The small farmer and campesino-led movement has done a remarkable job in recent months of focusing public and political attention on the need to reformulate Mexican agricultural policy, but the comprehensive policy changes the current situation requires cannot be achieved through pressure on the Fox administration and Mexican Congress alone. The roots - and the repercussions - of the current crisis are closely linked to Mexico's relationship to the U.S. and to the particular model of regional integration the two countries have chosen to pursue.

Increasingly, Civil society groups and policymakers in the U.S. concerned with immigration, food security, agricultural and environmental issues realize that they must pay attention to what is happening in rural Mexico and engage with Mexican civil society groups in the articulation of alternatives to the current model of bi-national integration. In a mid-December 2002 editorial, the National Family Farm Coalition asserted that "Agriculture cannot be considered just another sector of the economy left to the mercy of the 'free' market in efforts to maximize profit...small farmers in Mexico are right to demand protection for their agriculture products and a revision of NAFTA, and we must demand the same." Others have begun to call for incorporating a broad array of development indicators into any future integration plans and for comprehensive arrangements that guarantee human mobility and protection for workers throughout the region, as necessary complements to opening up the flow of goods and capital.

Meanwhile, governments throughout the hemisphere are pressing ahead with plans to establish a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) by January, 2005. Publicly released drafts of the FTAA indicate that it mirrors NAFTA's near-exclusive emphasis on facilitating international flows of capital and goods, as well as NAFTA's failure to address the broader range of social and environmental issues associated with regional integration.

Nevertheless, the strength of the campesino movement in Mexico, and the budding solidarity between small farmers in Mexico and the U.S., give observers reason to hope for a more sensible trade and development policies in the hemisphere. Emerging trans-national organizations comprised of Mexican emigrants also have the potential to play an important role in advocating for comprehensive approaches to regional integration. Members of these groups, known as hometown associations, have been directly impacted by the collapse of the countryside. As organizations, the hometown associations are becoming increasingly aware that they need make their voices heard in order to reshape the lopsided but ever-deepening relationship between the U.S. and Mexico.