



## enlacesAmérica

### Migrant organizations and political rights

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Movement across borders in the Western Hemisphere has reached unprecedented levels over the past 30 years. Nearly 25 million inhabitants of the American continents currently live in different countries than those where they were born and grew up. These massive population movements cannot be traced to a single cause. However, the structural problems presented by long-term lack of investment in human capital combined with increasing economic inequality and a lack of dignified economic opportunities for the majority of people in many countries go a long way toward explaining why so many people see migration—especially to the United States—as the only way to break out of poverty.

Parallel to these significant migration flows, we are experiencing an era of deterioration in the rights of foreigners. Since the beginning of the last decade, immigration legislation in the United States has treated immigrants as undesirables, who should be sent back to their places of origin if at all possible. We cannot deny the significance of xenophobia and racism in the current political context. According to recent census data, the demographic shifts of the past two decades have elevated the “Latino” or “Hispanic” population (with all of its heterogeneities) to the second most numerous ethnic group in the United States (after those who self-identify as “white”). This change has provoked fear and anxiety among those who believe that those of Latin American descent pose a threat to the cultural norms of this country. The events of 9/11 have aggravated this tendency, and now many see foreigners as potential terrorists as well.

If this were not enough, immigrants have become the scapegoat for a host of problems facing American workers. Objectively, the foreign-born population residing in the U.S. bears little responsibility for the economic policies that threaten middle-class American families. In fact, many immigrants found themselves obliged to leave their homes due to the same policies that contribute to unfair wealth distribution in the United States and in their countries of origin. But the facts have not stopped those who find it convenient to blame immigrants for the social ills of economic globalization.

The problem of perceiving migrants as a threat to the public well-being of the United States has led to a wave of regulations and legislative initiatives that tend to limit constitutional protections and redefine the terms of the historic debate on foreigners. The intention is to put an end to the concept of immigration, and fully embrace the concept of the portable, disposable worker.

#### A brief history of transnational organizing

Although the current context has spurred many immigrant groups to take a more active role in political advocacy in recent years, it is worth mentioning that transnational activism is nothing new. Nor has it been limited to only one or two specific issues. The Puerto Rican, Dominican, Cuban, Chilean, Haitian, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan communities, and certainly the Mexican community in the United States, have been working across borders on issues of concern to their communities for many years.

Although migrant organizations frequently lack resources and institutional capacity, they have managed to work effectively on a number of levels, including:

Providing services in communities of destination with the aim of promoting the healthy integration of new migrants into economic, civil, and cultural life in the adopted country. Migrant organizations provide diverse services, including: English classes, vocational training, computer courses, after-school child care, and cultural and social events.

Promoting political changes in countries of origin. The successful effort of Mexican federations and hometown clubs to promote the right of Mexicans to vote abroad is but one recent example. These groups have also pressed for the right for migrants to run for state and federal legislative offices. Ecuadorians living in Spain and Salvadorans in the United States have similar demands.

Working collectively to support local infrastructure and other projects aimed at improving the quality of life in communities of origin, exemplified by a decade of investments made by Mexican federations and clubs in infrastructure and in other community projects in the towns where they grew up.

In other cases, organized immigrant communities have focused on exerting political influence. To look at the specific case of Salvadorans, the first migrant organizations were founded by individuals who fled El Salvador due to the indiscriminate violation of human rights in their country and the subsequent civil war between 1980 and 1992. Consequently, organizations of Salvadoran migrants were formed and carried out their work in an atmosphere of hostility on the part of both the US government and the government of El Salvador. Under these circumstances, Salvadoran migrant organizations developed an early understanding of the crucial importance of autonomy, of being self-sufficient, of developing a grassroots base, of building leadership, and of alliances based on shared interests. Almost from the start, Salvadoran migrant groups formed national networks, since even small community organizations needed to exert transnational influence.

These examples illustrate that migrant organizations have an abundant history of political action and influence on transnational issues. Sharing the many accumulated experiences in this area would be enormously valuable for the processes underway today.

### A new transnational organizing effort —the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities

The many dynamic immigrant-led community organizations around the country constitute a necessary but not sufficient base for building and exercising a coordinated political power that could be deployed to improve conditions for immigrants and their families. In order for immigrant groups to work together across regions and organizations, they need to have both an inspiring vision for the future and a clear idea of the role that each organization can play in reaching that goal. To this end, building and exercising power will require, first, the capacity to organize as many people as possible around the organization's vision and mission, and, second, the capacity to generate or attract the greatest amount of resources possible, and to use them in relation to the organization's vision/mission.

The formation of the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities is an encouraging step in this direction. The Alliance (known as NALACC) is a coalition of more than 70 migrant organizations from throughout the United States who have joined together to promote a political agenda at both the national level in the United States, and in the corresponding countries of origin. Its motto, "A Transnational Vision—Rooted in Community," speaks to its cross-border commitment.

Over the past two years, NALACC members have articulated a broad work plan aimed at creating community power using the following strategies:

Building community power through three interrelated and mutually reinforcing activities: civic education, organizing, and community mobilization;

Developing and strengthening leadership skills to address knowledge and leadership gaps that hinder immigrant groups' efforts to impact public policy debates. NALACC will use a peer-to-peer leadership development model that leverages the talents that different members bring to the alliance;

Creative and consistent use of media to counter the extremely negative images of foreigners, which contribute to a broad-based anti-immigrant sentiment and negative public reactions to efforts for immigration reform;

Influencing research agendas and analysis to gradually increase the ability of immigrant communities to shape

research, rather than just being the objects of study;

Generating and seeking resources, both from philanthropic sources and from within immigrant communities. Local fundraising forms part of an education strategy to raise awareness of the importance of developing resources from within the community to pay for the activities that members have identified as priorities that are critical to NALACC's mission.

### Recommendations for the future of state-diaspora relations

Transnational migrant-led organizations have enormous potential to transform themselves into a key force working in favor of healthier and more equitable public policies for the region. However, such potential will not be realized without a significant investment in developing organizational capacities. The strengthening of the organizational capacities of migrant organizations should be a central priority in state-diaspora relations.

As part of this process, it is important that States and civil organizations view organized migrants in their full dimension and make them participating SUBJECTS in the formulation of policies and not limiting them to OBJECTS of those policies. Political parties and sitting governments should resist the tendency to gain short-term political advantage through manipulating the migration issue. Rather, governments should look at the range of policies that could yield long-term benefits for the people of this hemisphere, recognizing that many of their constituents are already transnational populations. Governments must move away from the "silo" approach to public policy, which, in Latin America, has isolated migration as a foreign policy issue. In countries with high rates of the national population living in other countries, as well as in countries that have witnessed a dramatic increase in immigration, there is no area of public policy that is not affected by migrations.