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Mexican and Central American Immigrant Community Leaders Gather to Explore Joint Concerns

On October 6, 2002, Enlaces América convened a small group of leaders of Mexican and Central American immigrant communities in order to initiate an ongoing dialogue about how to strengthen the role those communities play in the formulation of domestic and international policies that impact them. The day-long conversation amongst these leaders covered an array of topics, including how the strong transnational connections of Mexican and Central American communities are expressed in the work of the meeting participants; how to define a political vision and agenda for Latino immigrant communities that reflects their increasing demographic and economic importance to the U.S.; and how to strengthen immigrant organizations themselves in order to advance that agenda.

Mexican hometown associations or clubs, which exist as a means for immigrant communities in the US to better the conditions in their communities, states, or countries of origin, represent a concrete and direct expression of transnational connections. These organizations typically provide financial support for local development activities or projects in their places of origin. Some of them have begun to become involved in political advocacy efforts aimed at shaping policies impacting their communities at home. The ability for migrants to vote from abroad in elections in their countries of origin is a major issue of concrete interest to many of these hometown associations and clubs.

In the case of Central American immigrant communities, where the existence of hometown associations is a relatively new phenomenon (compared to the Mexican organizations, some of which have been around for more than 40 years), transnational linkages are often expressed by community leaders who were active in efforts during the 1980s to monitor human rights issues in their countries of origin and to advocate on behalf of refugees escaping the armed conflicts in those countries. Today, many of those leaders who were involved in solidarity efforts in the 1980s are leaders of immigrant community base organizations (CBOs). Over the past decade, some of these community-based organizations have come together to form national entities like the Salvadoran American National Network (SANN), which aim to impact the political processes that affect their countries of origin. Additionally, many Central American immigrant CBOs have played a leadership role in the collection and delivery of humanitarian aid to victims of recent natural disasters in the region. Finally, a number of Central American and Mexican organizations express their transnational relationships by working to strengthen

the cultural and social identities of immigrant communities in the US through community festivals, holiday events, etc.

The Latino immigrant population is growing rapidly in the U.S., but Latino communities have not been able to develop the political vision and tools to exercise the power that should correspond with that demographic growth. Meeting participants identified the following as some of the major challenges to the articulation of a Latino immigrant political agenda:

- The complex and layered identities of Mexican and Central American immigrants. As one participant put it, “First, I am a Michoacano [from the state of Michoacán], then I am a Mexican, and then, maybe a Latino.” As immigrants become more integrated in their adopted countries, they add even more layers, becoming “Chicagoans” or “Mexican-Americans” for example.
- The “myth of the return”: the tendency among many Mexican and Central American immigrants to view social and political participation in places of current residence as unnecessary, because they expect to return to their homes sometime soon.
- The fact that many Mexican and Central American immigrants arrive in the US having experienced very corrupt political systems in their countries of origin that didn’t respond to the needs of the population; these experiences often lead people to believe that everything that has to do with politics is corrupt or undesirable.
- The lack of resources for many grassroots immigrant community organizations and Hometown Federations, and the need to find a balance between the “professionalization” of these organizations and bureaucratization that would render them unresponsive and unaccountable to their constituencies.

Meeting participants agreed that it was crucial for Central American and Mexican immigrant community leaders to continue dialogues like the one initiated at this meeting. Participants also agreed that these same conversations need to take place at the local level with immigrant communities themselves, in order to begin to define principles of unity between Central American and Mexican communities.

Even as they acknowledged the challenges for working together, most of the participants at the meeting argued for deepening dialogue and understanding amongst exploding Mexican and Central American immigrant communities. Key regional policy decisions are likely to be taken in the region over the next several years and immigrants have yet to make their voices heard on most of them. Legalization topped the list of concerns for most participants, but they also signalled the importance of the pending regional economic negotiations – initiatives like the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), the proposed Central America – U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and Plan Puebla Panama. Participants also pointed to the increased marginalization of immigrant communities after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the militarization of Latin America as urgent issues of mutual concern.