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The Temporary Mexican Migrant Labor Program in Canadian Agriculture

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Research Project. A Study of the Program for Temporary Mexican Workers in Canadian Agriculture

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Executive Summary

During the early years of the Program (1974-1980), there was not much promotion for recruiting workers, and this was done only in states near Mexico City. By 1994, 80% of the participants came from six states in the central part of the country: Puebla, Tlaxcala, México, Morelos, Hidalgo, and Guanajuato. With the increase in the demand for workers and the decentralization of certain procedures for selecting and documenting workers, these have been incorporated from all the states. However, 70% of the participants still come from the central region of the country.

Since 1974, the year in which the program of Mexican workers began, the number of participants has increased on an average by 18% annually. This growth has been determined by Canadian employers' demand for workers: the periods showing the greatest increases were 1985 to 1989 and 1996 to 2000. Nominal workers account for 48% and 68%, respectively, of the total number of workers going to Canada each season.

The year 1989 was the first one in which Canadian farmers requested women workers through this Program. At present, women's participation in the total number of workers per season is around 3%. Although these numbers are very low, it is clear that women's participation in the Program has more than doubled in just a few years. This is due, above all, to an increase in the demand among Canadian employers, so that the women who have participated during all the seasons are the ones who are explicitly requested by their gender.

Operation of the Program

Throughout the years, several changes have been made to improve the Program's operation. A "single-window" system was set up to facilitate procedures, allowing workers to conduct most of the procedures in the Program Office without

having to go to the different government agencies. As of 1993, electronic files were prepared with data on each worker that has joined the Program; the aim is to be able to update the database.

Similarly, the participation of State Employment Services (SES) has been quite positive. The SES are 139 offices throughout the country that promote the program, provide orientation for interested candidates, and give support to the Program Office in contacting workers who have already participated and who have been requested by their employers by name.

However, the decentralization of certain other functions has still been difficult because there are not enough funds to provide the required training to the staff at the State Employment Services.

Research indicates that despite these significant advances, the Program's centralization still entails an additional cost for the workers, who have to pay, on an average, for six trips to Mexico City in order to conduct the necessary procedures every season.

Since May 2002, the Mexican Government has been giving financial support in the amount of \$3,000 pesos (about \$300 US dollars) to first-time workers for their trips to Mexico City in order to process their applications. According to the evaluation for the 2002 season made by the Program Office, 88.3% of all new workers received said grant that year.

More than three-fourths of the workers in our sample stated that they were provided with information prior to each trip to Canada. Responses about the information they received referred principally to the type of work they would be doing in Canada, the rules for behavior on the farms, and the rights of the workers. Although 144 of the subjects mentioned that they were given information on various topics, only nine referred specifically to labor rights and 99 answered that they were informed principally about the type of work they would be doing in Canada.

According to the survey findings, workers do not know clearly enough what their rights are as temporary workers in Canada. When asked to mention labor rights, 113 workers (31%) responded that they did not know what they are or did not remember them. Even those who responded that they did know their rights did not know very clearly what these consist of and how they can demand them. When workers were asked to mention some of these rights, there were 15 responses that referred to obligations and even prohibitions for the workers.

The growth of the number of participants has not been accompanied by an equal development of the administrative capacity of Mexican consulates in Canada. Those interviewed are aware that the consulates' function is to help them and to represent them while they are in Canada; they also have information on how to contact the staff of these offices. Yet only 30% of those interviewed stated that they have needed help from the consulate. Although this proportion is low, not all of them requested assistance from the consulate. Of the 98 workers who said that at some time they needed support from the consulate to report an accident or health problem, only 59 got in contact with it. And out of 80 workers who found it necessary to conduct some transaction while in Canada, only 61 requested support from the consulate. And even so, consulate staff can only attend to a limited portion of these requests for help.

Less than one-fourth of those interviewed consider the attention and representation given by the consulate to be adequate; 44.4% feel that they are not represented "as they should be"; 21% preferred not to give an opinion because they have never needed the consulate's services; the rest did not specify.

Perhaps because workers do not feel that they are attended to properly, 60% expressed that it would be advisable to have a union organization. A similar group (14%) would agree with this under certain conditions, while 21% were in disagreement.

The Consulate's personnel is analyzing if it would be feasible to create an Administrative Fund for the Program, similar to the one existing in the Program for the Caribbean workers, which is managed by deducting 5% of the workers' incomes. In the case of the Mexican workers, the Consulate recommends that this fund might work only

if workers' wages were increased, since otherwise it would become a heavy extra burden for them.

Regarding what workers like best in the Program, 37% said "everything"; 28% replied that what they like best is that it provides them with a job; 7.5% referred to the earnings and the benefits as the biggest advantage; for 6%, the personal and work experience that they get from participating in the Program is important; 5% said that what is best in the Program is the way it operates; and 4.2% were most pleased by how they were treated by their employer.

The question regarding what they like least about the Program was answered by only 183 workers. The rest feel that it has no disadvantages. Almost half of those who responded (87) referred to problems related to the way the Program operates, such as the trips to Mexico City to make arrangements, the medical examination, or some incidents that occurred because of organizational deficiencies. Another 26 workers (14% of those who answered the question) also replied to this effect, pointing out that the most negative aspect of the Program is its poor attention at the offices and in the Mexican consulate. For 11% (21 cases), the environment is the disagreeable aspect of the Program. By this they are referring to aspects such as being far away from their families, the difficulties of living on the farms, the climate, etc. For 10% (18 workers), the biggest disadvantage of the Program is that the employers treat the workers badly. There was a smaller proportion of workers who made negative comments about the work in general, about the working conditions, about the low wages, or about amounts deducted from their wages.

The workers' suggestions for improving the program had to do with the disadvantages mentioned. 38% of those interviewed who answered this question had no suggestions because they felt that everything is working well. Almost half of them (44.5%) made recommendations about the Program's operations, the functioning of the office in Mexico and the consulate's, amongst others. Some aspects to which they referred are expediting and decentralizing the arrangements, improving service, and for the consulate to really meet the workers' needs. The remainder of the replies referred to improvements in wages and in working conditions.

The research project did not seek to make a cost-benefit evaluation of the Program; however, it gave us some elements to put on the table. It seems that through the years, the Mexican Government has accepted some conditions that have meant a heavier workload, as well as a higher economic cost, for both the government and the workers.

One example refers to the modifications made to the MOU. The first MOU stated that the Human Development Research Center must request workers 45 days before the date they are needed in Canada. This period has been reduced to 20 days according to the last MOU. However, requests are often arriving to the Program Office only 10 days in advance.

At the beginning of the Program, the Mexican Government had to prepare a 100-worker reserve in order to respond to any sudden demand. Now, this reserve must be 10% of the total request, which means that the Mexican Government needs to prepare 1,000 workers more every season. According to the 2002 evaluation of the Program, 10,681 workers went to Canada; however, 11,659 procedures were made, including the medical exam.

Another example of the work and economic costs that the Program Office has accepted in Mexico is the medical exam. In earlier years, workers were examined at the Canadian Embassy. Later, governmental medical centers in Mexico subsidized the exams, but as of 2001, the government charges \$70 pesos (\$7 USD) per exam to the workers. In addition, since the 2003 season, workers have had to take an HIV test and pay an additional fee of around \$175 pesos (\$17.50 USD).

At present, it is not easy to ascertain the cost of the Program for the Mexican Government. The Federal Government Budget for 2002 is the first one to show a sum of funds allocated to the Program Office. In the section for the Ministry of Labor, the entry called “Program of Mexican Migrant Temporary Farm Workers to Canada” records \$23,396,454 pesos (\$ 2,339,645 USD). This means that in the 2002 season, that office alone spent around \$2,190 pesos (\$219 USD) per worker who went to Canada to work. This budget does not include the \$3,000 pesos (\$300 USD) in economic support that

new participants are receiving. According to the Evaluation of the 2003 season, 2,341 workers received that support, which means \$7,023,000 pesos (around \$ 702,300 USD).

Participation and characteristics of the workers

Next are some of the general characteristics of the workers who participate in the Program, according to the survey findings. The workers have an average level of schooling of 7.7 years, almost equal to the national mean.

The main occupation of workers while they are in Mexico is agriculture, mostly as day-laborers; a few work as masons; and to a lesser degree, in service-related activities. In the case of the occupation of the children of the workers, the trend is for them to devote themselves more to non-agricultural activities.

Access to cropland among the workers in this sample is very limited, and the few who have this possibility have small rain-fed plots (of 1-2 hectares). The main crop is corn, which mostly goes to family subsistence; very few workers grow commercial crops. For most of the workers who have access to land, farming does not represent an important source of income. According to our survey, during the last season in which they planted, 32% indicated that their production was insufficient and 16% said that although they planted, there was no harvest; 29% stated that production was sufficient for family consumption but not enough to face all other expenditures of the households.

With regard to trips to Canada, almost half of those interviewed (173) indicated that they had a close relative who had gone previously under the Program; they referred principally to their brothers and in a few cases to their parents (124 cases). Recruitment for work in Canada is more closely linked to family ties than to community networks. The other important source for recruitment has been the activities performed by the Program Office for this purpose.

The main reasons that workers indicated for joining the Program were the lack of employment in Mexico as well as the uncertainty of income if they had a job. In the sample, 58% of the workers indicated that although they had some form of income in Mexico, it was not sufficient nor stable and 14% decided to enter the Program because they did not have a job. At present, while workers are in Mexico, their economic

activities are usually temporary and the average income reported was \$544 pesos per week (about \$ 55 US dollars).

Working conditions in Canada

Our sample included workers who have gone to Canada from 1 to 25 seasons from the year 1977 to the year 2002. Nearly three-fourths of the workers (73%) continued to be active during that last season. This reveals a high degree of continuity of the workers in this Program, and can be interpreted not only as a sign of satisfaction among the workers themselves, but also as an overall expression of the Program's stability.

According to the 2002 Season Evaluation of the Program Office, of the total of workers participating, 70% of Mexican workers went to the Province of Ontario, 24.6% went to Quebec, and the rest to Manitoba and Alberta. The main agricultural industries that required Mexican workers that season were the production of vegetables and the greenhouses, with 41.6% and 18%, respectively.

The interviewed workers spent an average of 4.9 months in Canada each season. In practice, workers do not have the chance to decide the time of their stay, first because many of them are requested by name and they must adjust to the employers' needs. For the rest, their period of stay is also determined by demand, as well as by the candidate's labor profile: his or her physical condition and the date on which the worker initiated the procedures.

Moreover, during the 2002 season, around 60% of all the Mexican workers who went to Canada returned before their contracts had expired because there was no more work on the farms. In our fieldwork, those interviewed stated that sometimes when they arrive at the farms, they find that there is not enough work for them to complete an 8-hour day. The employer can attempt to transfer the worker to another farm, but when that is not possible, the worker returns to Mexico with much less money than he or she had expected to earn.

Mexican workers are hired by Canadian farmers mostly to harvest the crops. In our research we found only two workers who performed activities that require more technical knowledge in the productive process.

Housing that employers provide to workers consists of the following: 1) the old farm house; 2) hostels built by the employer specifically for them are the next in frequency; 3) lodging in trailers. The housing provided by the farmers usually has the necessary utilities. In general, a little less than half of the workers stated that the housing and the services provided to them by their employers in Canada are of better quality than what they have in their communities in Mexico; for 18%, their housing in Mexico is of better quality, and for 27%, the quality of both lodgings is similar.

Even though for most of them, the work that they perform on Canadian farms is as easy or even easier than the agricultural work that they do in Mexico, one-fourth of them felt that the work is very hard, and one-fifth felt that occasionally they had been asked to work too much. They mentioned that on many occasions the work pace, as well as the long working days, make work heavier.

We recorded some complaints about mistreatment, but the return report for the 2002 season is more illustrative on that matter: according to it, one-fifth of the participants believe that they were treated either “regular” or “bad,” but mostly “regular.” It may be that this answer is, in fact, concealing some sort of bad treatment which the workers are afraid to state explicitly.

In the fieldwork, we also found that many of those interviewed who said that they had suffered some kind of abuse by their employers or supervisors, preferred not to report the incident for fear that their employer would not request them for the following work season. In this regard, the system of requesting workers by name provides workers with a certain guarantee of continuity, and may also be functioning as a control mechanism.

Of the total number of workers interviewed, 24% have applied agrochemicals on Canadian ranches and 34% have gone to work in fields recently sprayed with

agrochemicals. Of those who have worked applying agrochemicals, only 43% have protected themselves with a mask and the proper gear.

Despite the fact that the activities they conduct are simple, in general the training the workers received was scarce. Only 45% of those interviewed responded that they had received some training. In these cases, they referred to information received in the field while they were working. Only six workers answered that they had received broader training.

In general, responses concerning attention given to them for accidents and health problems are favorable. The workers have received proper attention in those cases. Nonetheless, when the workers' illnesses arise after their work contract has expired, the workers have to cover the cost of treatment or see to it that they are taken care of in some government-run hospital in Mexico.

Wages and deductions

It was difficult to obtain precise data on this. Both the records of the Program Office and the data captured by the interview are at times imprecise or omit information. The best source for this should be employers' records.

However, with its limitations, the data obtained clearly indicates that the income of Mexicans on Canadian farms is much higher than what they could earn in Mexico, even if they had the opportunity to work all year long. This confirms the fact that the income is the main appeal of the Program for the workers.

For that reason, and with a few exceptions, the workers pointed out that they have no problem about working overtime. Yet Canadian legislation does not oblige farmers to pay overtime at a higher rate in all cases. All the workers in the sample have worked overtime, but the pay has been equal to that of regular work hours. It is common for those interviewed to work on Sundays and holidays; some pointed out that they have worked for as long as 17 hours in one day. The average for the sample was 9.3 hours per day.

There is ignorance among the workers regarding deductions of taxes and services from their wages, as well as the mechanisms that are applicable for reimbursement. But the workers feel that too much money is being deducted from their wages, and in some cases they feel this is unfair. According to the answers obtained in the questionnaire, the difference between the gross and net earnings of the workers is close to 20%.

The workers do not know how the pension program operates. And certainly they would like to know more about it, especially since some have worked for many years and are near the age at which they will stop working in the Program. But since the pension is determined by the number of weeks worked, the work situation of these temporary workers limits the amount of their pension. In fact, the two workers from the sample who are receiving their monthly pension stated that they were disappointed with how little money they were getting.

Relations between the worker and the community in Canada

Mexican workers in Canada face several kinds of obstacles that hinder their integration into Canadian communities. The main obstacles are lack of knowledge of the local language, and the isolated condition of the farms.

Out of the total, 96% (346) of the subjects work on farms remote from towns; most frequently the farms are located at a distance of 20 km. Not all the ranches have access to public transportation. More than 70% go into town if taken by the employer even to purchase groceries, make telephone calls, and effect bank transactions.

The isolated condition of the farms, as well as the fact that the workers are dependent upon the employers, leads to a limited degree of freedom for workers to decide upon the use of their free time.

Employers provide some forms of entertainment on the ranches (TV, VCR, table games, fields for practicing soccer or basketball, etc.). On their own, and in a limited fashion, some workers have become involved in the organization of sports tournaments or trips to tourist attractions.

Although few workers have had contact with volunteer groups and non-governmental organizations devoted to helping agricultural workers, the answers obtained give the impression that the work that has been done by these organizations is important to the workers.

Program impacts

As regards the Program's impact, we can sum up the conclusions as follows:

- a) The greatest impact is felt at the individual and family level of the workers
- b) It is derived from the money earned by the worker and
- c) It can be appreciated after several seasons in which the worker participates in the Program.

Almost all the workers pointed out that their family's well-being has improved. The proportion of those who feel this way is greater as the time they have participated in the Program increases. According to their statements, their families have better clothing and food; greater access to health services, and what seems to be very important to them, their children can continue their education and achieve a higher level of schooling than they did.

The information obtained on changes in housing conditions allows us to observe the relationship between longer participation in the Program and family well-being. All the indicators concerning better-quality housing show that the more seasons a worker has participated in the Program, the better the features of his or her housing.

During their first seasons of participation, the workers allocated their income to family consumption, especially to subsistence, health, and education, or to pay off pending debts. Only after several years of working temporarily in Canada can they have surplus income with which they can make other expenditures. That is when they may acquire, enlarge, or modify the family home. Therefore, the impact is different according to the frequency and number of trips made by the worker. That is why it is important to continue the practice of allowing workers to continue to go to Canada for several seasons, perhaps as many as 10 or more.

Nevertheless, the money obtained by the workers in Canada does not appear to be sufficient for them to acquire other types of goods. Very few of those interviewed currently have an automobile.

Similarly, there is practically no investment in some sort of agricultural or non-agricultural business, partly due to the limited money available to the workers and partly due to the traits of the workers' communities.

As regards the level of schooling attained by their children, those interviewed stated that thanks to their participation in the Program, their children have been able to continue with their education. Although in Mexico it has been possible to increase the level of schooling in recent decades, our research confirms that the Program has also had a positive effect. Thus, the greater the number of years that the head of the household has participated in the Program, the higher the level of schooling of his or her children.

Moreover, the children's level of schooling has a bearing on their occupations. We have found a greater tendency for workers' children to devote themselves to non-agricultural activities. In particular, we discovered that 15 children are professionals and, in almost all the cases, these are children of workers with longer periods of participation in the Program.

Therefore, we can state that the Program is helping to alleviate the effects of rural poverty.

In addition, although to a lesser extent, the Program has had certain indirect effects on the communities where the workers live, either through an increase in their families' purchasing power or through the effects of greater economic activity thanks to housing construction.