

MEMO

Complex Migration Flows and Multiple Drivers in Comparative Perspective



Background country report on Guatemala within the migration system of the Americas

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The MEMO Research Project

MEMO is a **multidisciplinary project** to develop a socio-ecological system framework that integrates drivers (main contextual factors) and individual determinants of migration; its primary objectives are:

To map the links between internal, intra-regional and intercontinental migration along complex population dynamics and migration systems;

- To describe and interpret the interplay among migration drivers (environmental conditions, demographic and health factors, economic development dynamics, socio-political issues), accounting for cultural and emotional processes that can shape individual decisions to migrate;
- To provide evidence to inform policy and support an efficient and rights-based governance of international migration.

Differences and analogies of migration drivers and determinants are comparatively established across (and within) the following regional migration systems:

- **The Americas** – focusing on migration flows from the northern countries of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) to Mexico and further North to the USA and Canada.
- **West Africa** – focusing on Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Ivory Coast and their inter-related flows to each other, to neighbouring countries in West Africa and towards Europe and Canada.
- **South Asia** – focusing on Nepal and Bangladesh, internal and cross border flows within South Asia, as well as to Malaysia and Canada. The migration system and population dynamics are described and modelled to capture the plurality of (multi-directional) population flows.

MEMO will contribute innovative analytical tools to support a rights-based governance of migration and related drivers.

Research partner organizations



Background country report Guatemala within the migration system of the Americas

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1.0 Introduction

Historically, Guatemala has been a country of origin and transit of migrant flows, mainly directed to the United States. In recent years, however, Guatemala has also become the recipient of significant return migration flows, as well as a country of asylum for migrants from Central America and other regions of the world.

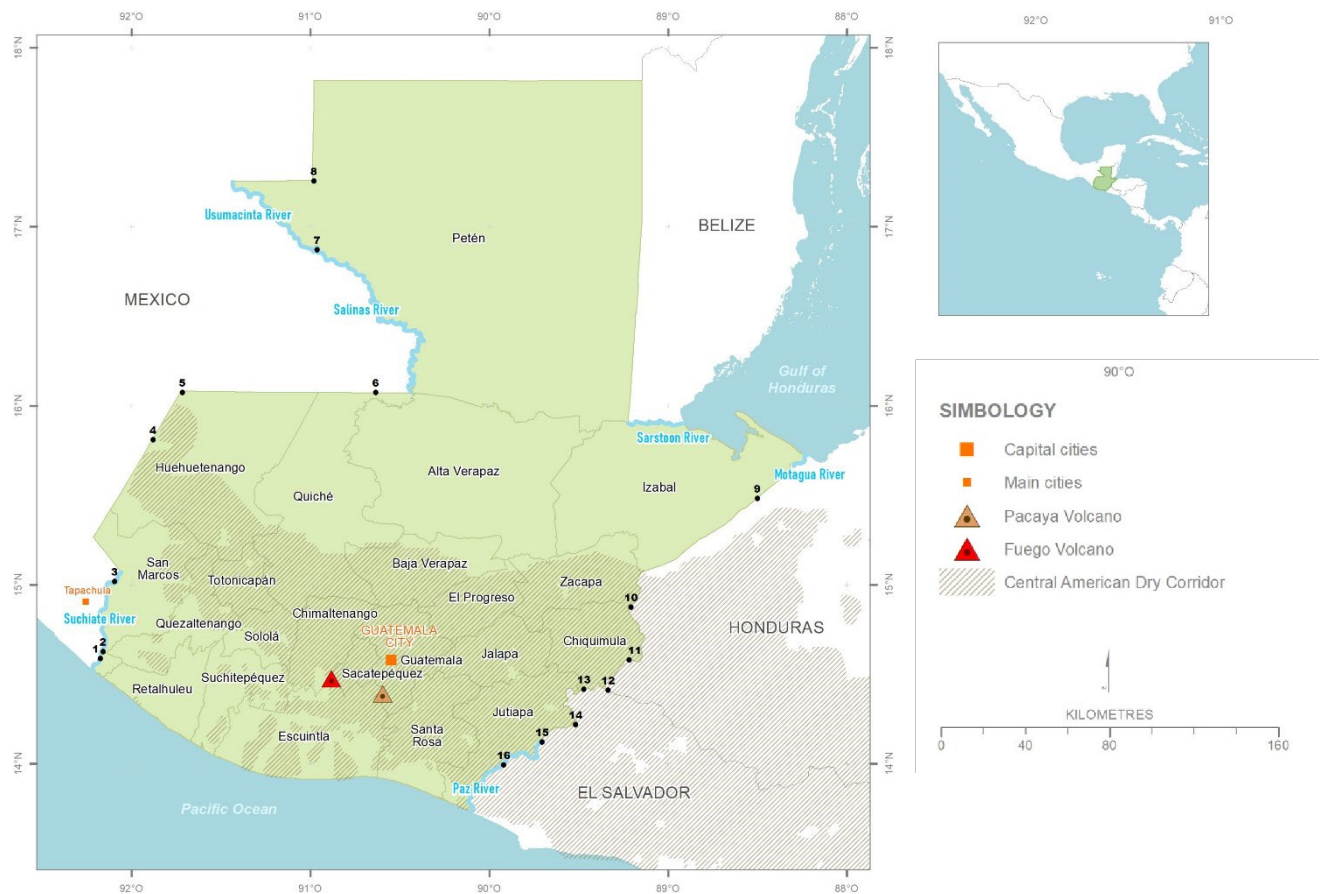
In this report, we look at migration dynamics in Guatemala and their recent transformation. We focus on internal, intra-regional, and intercontinental migration dynamics, and review the literature that explores decision-making for migration, to identify the topics we believe should be part of a future research agenda. Our aim is to provide a general panorama of what is known about Guatemala's role in regional and global migration dynamics and the still open questions that the MEMO project ought to address.

In order to contextualize Guatemala's migration dynamics, we provide a brief characterization of the country and a look at its main socio-demographic and economic indicators. Guatemala is located between 14° and 18° north latitude and 88° and 92° west longitude. It is situated to the south of Mexico and, together with Belize, is the geographic head of the Central American Isthmus. It is bordered to the north by Mexico (960 kilometers), to the east by Belize (266 kilometers) and the Caribbean Sea (148 kilometers), to the southeast by Honduras (256 kilometers), to the southwest by El Salvador (203 kilometers) and to the south by the Pacific Ocean (254 kilometers) (INE, 2021a; Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea, 2023). Guatemala's total surface is 108,890 km² and the territory is divided into 22 departments and 340 municipalities (see Map 1).

According to the XII National Population Census (INE, 2021a), in 2018 the population of Guatemala was 14,901,286 inhabitants, with a projection for 2022 at 17,354,886 inhabitants (INE, 2023). In 2022, 49% of them were men and 51% women (The World Bank, n.d.). Guatemala is a predominantly young country: in 2022, 32% of the total population was between 0 and 14 years old; 63% was between 15 and 64 years old, and 5% was 65 years and older (The World Bank, n.d.).

Regarding the ethnic composition, in 2018, 56% of the Guatemalans identified themselves as Ladino (mestizo), 41.7% Mayan, 1.8% Xinca, 0.2% Afro-descendant/Creole/Afromestizo, and 0.1% Garífuna (INE, 2021a). With 162 inhabitants per square kilometer (The World Bank, n.d.), Guatemala is the fourth most densely populated country in the Americas.

Map 1. Guatemala and its borders



Border crossing

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. & 2. Tecún Umán – Ciudad Hidalgo | 9. El Corinto |
| 3. El Carmen – Talismán | 10. El Florido |
| 4. La Mesilla – Ciudad Cuauhtémoc | 11. Agua Caliente |
| 5. Gracias a Dios – Carmen Xhan | 12. Triple Border |
| 6. Ingenieros – Nueva Orizaba | 13. La Ermita – Anguiatú |
| 7. Bethel – Frontera Corozal | 14. San Cristóbal |
| 8. El Ceibo | 15. Valle Nuevo – Las Chinamas |

Source: CentroGeo’s (Gabriela Quiroz Cázares) elaboration on DIVA-GIS and CentroGeo data.

In 2022, 53% of Guatemala’s population lived in urban areas and 47% in rural ones (The World Bank, n.d.). According to the 2021 National Employment and Income Survey (INE, 2021b), in 2021, 63% of the Guatemalan working age population was economically active, mostly in the informal sector (73%). With a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 2022 of USD 95 billion and a GDP per capita of USD 5,473 in the same year (The World Bank, n.d.), Guatemala is considered a lower-middle income country. It is also a country of medium human development, and ranked 135th globally in 2021 (UNDP, 2022). In 2019 poverty affected 54% of the population (The World Bank, 2023). Finally, Guatemala’s economy is highly dependent on remittances, which accounted for 19.1% of the national GDP in 2022 (The World Bank, n.d.).

Table 1. Guatemala: Selected economic and socio-demographic indicators, 2022

Surface*	108,890 km ²
Total population (projection)**	17,354,886
Male / Female (% of total population)*	49% / 51%
Age structure (% of total population)*	14 years old or younger: 32% 15-64 years old: 63% 65 years or older: 5%
Ethnic composition (% of total population in 2018)+	Ladino (mestizo): 56% Mayan: 41.7% Xinca: 1.8% Afrodescendant/Creole/Fromestizo: 0.2% Garifuna: 0.1%
Population density	162 inhabitants per km ²
Urban / Rural (% of total population)*	53% / 47%
Economically active population (% of working age population)+	63%
GDP (USD)*	95 billion
GDP per capita (USD)*	5,473.00
HDI++	0.627
Poverty (% of total population)+++	54%
Remittances (% of GDP)*	19.1%

Sources: *The World Bank, n.d.; ** INE, 2023; +INE, 2021a; ++UNDP, 2022; +++The World Bank, 2023

Like the rest of Central American countries, Guatemala is extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change and natural disasters. 11% of Guatemala's territory is encompassed within the Dry Corridor (*Corredor Seco*), a geographical area that is 1,600 kilometers long and 100-400 kilometers wide, covering parts of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, characterized by long periods of drought, followed by intense rains (FAO, 2022). Extreme events of rain, drought, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions strike the country recurrently, resulting in human displacement as well as loss of life, infrastructure, and livelihoods.

Guatemala is one of the American continent countries most affected by violence from criminal gangs and transnational organized crime. It also records high recurrence of gender-based and intra-family violence. Widespread insecurity is associated with the weak institutional framework of the justice system, the growing incidence of corruption and, more generally, the absence of the rule of law (Alvarado, 2021; Ruiz, 2021; Wolf, 2020).

Because of its geographical location in the Central American Isthmus that connects the north and the south of the American continent, Guatemala is part of a natural migration corridor. Until the end of the 20th century, Guatemala was fundamentally a country of origin for labor migration, both short-distance to Mexico and long-distance to the United States. This changed in the early 2000s due to internal factors – such as economic crises, a weak rule of law, and high levels of violence – as well as external factors – including migration policies implemented in the United States and Mexico, and political and economic crises in other countries of the region.

As the northernmost country in Central America and Mexico's southern neighbor, Guatemala is part of what Jorge Durand has called the Mesoamerican migration subsystem, itself a component of the North American system; namely, "a set of global processes that revolve around the United States, the receiving country *par excellence*" (Durand, 2016, p. 23). Although the main migration flows from Guatemala are still predominantly northbound and aimed at the United States, since the 2010s there has been an increasing number of Guatemalan returnees from Mexico and the U.S., extra-regional, extracontinental --and hitherto atypical-- transit flows, as well as a growing number of asylum seekers from Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

These new developments further compound the migration panorama in Guatemala. The Guatemalan state lacks the institutional, economic, and political capacities to offer its population viable alternatives to migration and is furthermore unable to protect its citizens either within or beyond its national borders. The new incoming flows of migrants exacerbates the pressures that Guatemalan institutions already experience and risk limiting even more the state's capacity to respond, thus increasing the vulnerability of the Guatemalan migrant population, migrants in transit through Guatemala and immigrants alike. Understanding these developments and how they impact Guatemala's migration dynamics is a prime goal of this research project.

Moreover, from a systemic perspective, it is essential to understand how the recent policies and the ensuing migration flows have transformed the regional and global migration systems more generally. In the face of this this situation, it is important to ask: Are we witnessing a transformation of the Mesoamerican subsystem and/or the North American migration system? Are the new migratory flows becoming a permanent feature of the regional system? If so, how do/will they transform it? In this changing environment, the following question is equally important: what is Guatemala's role and how – if at all — does it impact the global system?

2.0 Migration dynamics

Migrations occur in specific contexts "and as a product of the historical shaping of economic, political, and sociocultural systems that combine the interaction of local, regional, and global spheres" (Sassen, 2016, pp. 30-31). Guatemala's insertion in the Mesoamerican migration subsystem can be explained in this light. Indeed, the historical, economic, and political ties that were built between the countries of Central America and the United States since the late 19th century generated a close relationship of dependence that eventually triggered Guatemalan migration flows to the U.S., a settler state built on significant contingents of immigrants from all over the world (Massey, 2017, pp. 363-366; Tokatlian, 2009).

During the 20th century, economic growth in the United States accentuated the differences. In 1960, the U.S. GDP was USD 543.3 billion, while Guatemala's was USD 1.04 billion. Sixty years later, the gap had widened exponentially: in 2020 the U.S. GDP was USD 21.06 trillion, while Guatemala's was USD 77.6 billion (The World Bank, n.d.). The sheer size and strength

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of the U.S. economy became the main pull factor of Guatemalan migration to the United States. Mostly unauthorized, this migration stream was composed of young, rural males who took low-skill and low-paid jobs in the agricultural sector.

Yet, the first large-scale internal and external migration flows were not directed to the United States. Rather, they took place within the immediate region, as a result of the internal armed conflict that ravaged Guatemala throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. The scorched earth strategy that the Guatemalan army used against the guerrillas led to massive internal displacements, as well as large flows of asylum seekers who crossed the border with Mexico. Between 1980 and 1982 alone, over 200,000 Mayan men, women and children, the population of entire villages, arrived in Mexico and settled in improvised camps in the border municipalities of Chiapas (Castillo and Venet Rebiffé 2010; Nájera Aguirre, 2021).

Although the conflict continued, in 1986 a civilian government took power. Under its wing, a refugee repatriation program was set in motion. It is estimated that within the following six years, 38,000 Guatemalan *unofficial* refugees –since they were never formally granted international protection-- returned to their country, while many more decided to stay in Mexico. Among them, 22,000 had their immigration status regularized and 2,000 more were naturalized as Mexican (Rodríguez de Ita, 2008).

The war came to an end only in 1996. The ensuing national peace process and the so-called democratic transition were accompanied by economic transformations in line with the Washington consensus, which fostered the market economy, severely limiting the role of the state, encouraging free trade agreements, and the recently pacified country's integration in the global economy (Fuentes-Knight, 2022). Structural reforms and a weakened state apparatus, with no capacity to mitigate the worst effects of such reforms, led to unemployment and the impoverishment of the middle and lower-income classes. According to Villafuerte Solís, one of the most significant outcomes of these economic policies was the staggering increase of international migration and the subsequent growing contribution of remittances to the GDP of Central American countries. In Villafuerte Solís' words (2008, pp. 146-147), "[t]he apparent paradox is that the massive migration flows were not the product of the war, but of the opening of the market and deregulation, in a context of transition to democracy." In contrast to the previous flows, this new economic migration comprised a more significant participation of middle urban and professional sectors and, for the first time, also women.

Climate change and natural disasters, which have compounded the difficult economic situation that remains a constant in Guatemala, have also affected migration dynamics. In 1998, Hurricane Mitch, "the second deadliest Atlantic hurricane" recorded, caused 268 deaths, material losses of over USD 748 million and displaced more than 730,000 people (IADB, 2005). It is not known how many people left the country because of the effects of the hurricane, but according to Riosmena (2023), Mitch had a negative effect on the mobility of poorer households and a positive effect on less marginalized ones. Throughout the 21st century, there have been several slow-onset and sudden-impact disasters in Guatemala: recurrent droughts, tropical storms Stan (2005), Felix (2007), Agatha (2010), and 12E (2011), tropical depressions Eta and Iota (2020), and the eruptions of Volcán Pacaya (2010) and Volcán de Fuego (2018).

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All these disasters have led to recorded massive internal displacements; however, their impacts on international migration from Guatemala are less straightforward.

Meanwhile, the absence of the rule of law and institutional weakness are also associated with migration from Guatemala (Payan, 2021; NCATFM, 2021). The regimes that emerged after the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996 and the democratic transition were characterized by weak institutionality, weak governance, and failure to meet the welfare aspirations of Guatemalan society. The corruption of political institutions further deepened these weaknesses, as did the involvement of social actors, private corporations, and to some extent, the growing influence of drug trafficking organizations at local and national levels, in the branches of government and in the justice, security and defense apparatuses (Dudley, 2016; Waxenecker, et al., 2019).

With regard to violence as a driver of migration in Guatemala, two actors must be mentioned. First, the violent organized criminal groups, both transnational and local, that produce and transport drugs for the Mexican drug cartels, in addition to being involved in arms trafficking, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking (Zepeda et al., forthcoming). The second are *maras*, the violent street gangs that marginalized Latin American youths had originally formed in Los Angeles, California. After the 1996 adoption of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in the United States and the ensuing massive deportation of unauthorized Central American immigrants, the uprooted youths reproduced in their new countries – El Salvador and Honduras – the gangs that had given them a sense of belonging in the U.S. Named after the Los Angeles streets where they were founded, the most prominent *maras* today are Mara Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13) (ECAP, 2019).

As sub-cultural groups, *maras* are strongly territorial and resort to extreme violence to assert and retain control of their dominions, which today stretch far beyond their original marginal neighborhoods. *Maras'* vertical, clique-based hierarchical structure has enabled them to extend their presence beyond national boundaries and they have now become truly transnational criminal organizations reaching as far north as Guatemala and the south of Mexico. Threats, extortion, rape, and murder are among the repertoire of violent actions that they use to target especially Central America's young population and, increasingly, migrant persons in transit (Farah, 2016; PDDH-Cristosal, 2020).

International migration policies have also played a role in the nature, composition, and timing of recent migrant flows from Guatemala. In 2012, the Obama administration adopted the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which protected from deportation several thousands of noncitizens, most of them from Mexico and Central America, who had arrived in the U.S. in their childhood. As the word spread in Central America, the program was wrongly interpreted to entail a general admission policy for minors into the U.S. (Rojas-Wiesner, 2023; Stinchcomb and Hershberg, 2014; Zepeda and Fuentes-Carrera, 2020, p. 61). Flows of over 66,000 unaccompanied boys and girls from all over Central America followed, giving rise to a humanitarian emergency at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The U.S. government responded by implementing more stringent immigration controls, and by externalizing its border control to Mexico, where detentions of Central American migrants soared. The stricter controls at the Mexico-Guatemala border forced the migrant population to venture into ever more dangerous routes to avoid detection. This made them more vulnerable to the abuses of corrupt authorities and criminal gangs and boosted an already booming migrant smuggling industry.

Donald Trump's advent to the U.S. presidency in 2017 marked the beginning of a new phase in the history of Central American migration. President Trump's anti-migrant campaign rhetoric became clear anti-migrant policy in the wake of the migrant caravans. In 2018, coinciding with the mid-term elections in the U.S. and the advent of a new, initially migrant-friendly, administration in Mexico, the first massive migrant caravans departed from Honduras with the specific aim to enter the United States, setting off the alarm in that country.

Box 1. The migrant caravans

The caravans were large groups of Central American migrants who sought visibility and protection by traveling en masse (Arriola Vega, 2019; Ferris-Dobles, 2023). In so doing, they built upon previously existing traditions of short-term cross-border mobilization. Since at least 2011, the *Viacrucis del migrante* had been carried out as a mobilization of migrants' rights defenders, who gathered at the Guatemala-Mexico border every year during the Holy Week, to cross into Mexico and "denounce the grievances to which [migrants] are subjected in their transit" through that country (Vargas Carrasco 2018, §14). In 2017, one of the *Viacrucis* contingents did not stop in Mexico City, as had happened in the past, but continued to Tijuana, in the north of the country, from where around one hundred people crossed the border to the United States and requested asylum (Arriola Vega, 2019: 8). It was thus that the migrant caravans were inaugurated as a modus operandi of transnational migration, based on international visibility and with its members' express purpose to seek asylum in the U.S.

The 2017 mobilization was followed by others, each of which was larger. In March 2018, the *Viacrucis del migrante* began its journey through Mexican territory with about 2,500 people. In October of that year, through social media, the call for what would become the first massive caravan was launched in Honduras. Having left San Pedro Sula with a contingent of 160 people, and after crossing Guatemala from south to north, by the time the caravan reached the Mexican border in mid-October, it had gathered around 7,000 people. A second caravan left Honduras on October 20, 2018. Despite having been repelled by Guatemalan police forces, it managed to reach the border with Mexico, where 1,500 people crossed into that country (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, n.d.). Throughout the next two years, other caravans of various sizes departed from both Honduras and El Salvador. Gradually, they were joined by migrants from the Caribbean, Asia, and Africa, who saw the caravans as a safe and economic way to reach the United States.

The caravans represented a novel modality of migration in the region. Initially they were composed of Central American families, women traveling alone or with their children, unaccompanied boys and girls, and LGBT+ populations, mainly from El Salvador and Honduras. Later, and in waves, Haitian, Cuban, Indian, Bangladeshi, Cameroonian and Congolese migrants joined the caravans on their way to the United States.

The Trump administration reacted forcefully against the caravans. In order to deter further arrivals, it implemented family separation practices, overcrowding and inhumane treatments in migrant detention centers. With threats to levy high taxes on remittances, should the migrant

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flows continue, it pressured the Guatemalan government into signing a third safe country agreement, also known as the Asylum Cooperation Agreement (ACA) in 2019 (DHS, 2020; Semple, 2019). The ACA obligated Guatemala to receive Salvadoran and Honduran citizens returned from the United States and grant them asylum if they had crossed to Mexico through Guatemalan territory. This entailed controlling the transit of Central American citizens in Guatemala, even though since 2005, the CA-4, a free circulation agreement between Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua had been in place (SELA, n.d.).

Moreover, with the Mexican government's acquiescence, in January 2019 the U.S. government adopted the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or "Remain in Mexico" program, which sent asylum seekers who had entered the U.S. through the border with Mexico to wait back in Mexico for the legal resolution of their case. According to the American Immigration Council (2022), over 70,000 –mostly Central American--migrants and asylum seekers were returned to Mexico since the MPP went into effect. Because the Mexican government lacks the capacity and/or will to meet the needs of the migrants who are detained, in transit, or simply waiting in Mexico, the vulnerability of these populations has increased dramatically.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced human mobility throughout the world (see MacAuliffe and Triandafyllidou, eds., 2021). In March 2020, the U.S. government invoked Title 42, a law empowering federal authorities to prohibit migrants from entering the country to prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Under Title 42 migrants were expelled swiftly and sent back to their home countries or their more recent transit country --in most cases, Mexico--, denying them the possibility to even apply for asylum. At the same time, Title 42 made it possible for migrants to attempt to re-enter as many times as they could, without facing legal consequences. Of the nearly two million expulsions that took place under Title 42 between its inception and its expiry in May 2023, around 15% were Guatemalan citizens (Gramlich, 2022). In Guatemala itself, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on human mobility were also felt. For one thing, lockdowns significantly reduced internal mobility; for another, cross-border mobility was impeded by closures and other measures justified on the grounds of public health. Thus, while new, smaller, caravans set out from Honduras in late 2020, they did not even make it to the Mexican border, since they were stopped before entering Guatemala because the authorities requested negative COVID-19 tests (Arroyo, 2020; Reina, 2020).

After the pandemic waned, migrant flows from, in and through Guatemala have continued evolving in a sort of layered way. The economic migrants, who traditionally crossed into Mexico to get to the U.S., are now joined by family members, often unaccompanied minors, aiming to join their families; family units fleeing violence; Cuban, Venezuelan and Nicaraguan migrants who have fled repression or political turmoil in their countries; as well as by migrants from other world regions, who are attracted by the pull factors in the U.S. and now deem it a viable alternative to get there by land, after crossing to Mexico from Guatemala. People in Guatemala continue to be forcibly displaced by violence and environmental disasters; unprecedented numbers of Guatemalans are being returned from Mexico and the U.S. while many more are requesting asylum in those two countries. Moreover, because of the Asylum Cooperation

Agreement, Guatemala is now a destination for asylum seekers not only from Honduras and El Salvador, but also from extracontinental migrants. All these developments signal the increasing complexity of migration dynamics in Guatemala and its changing role in the global migration system.

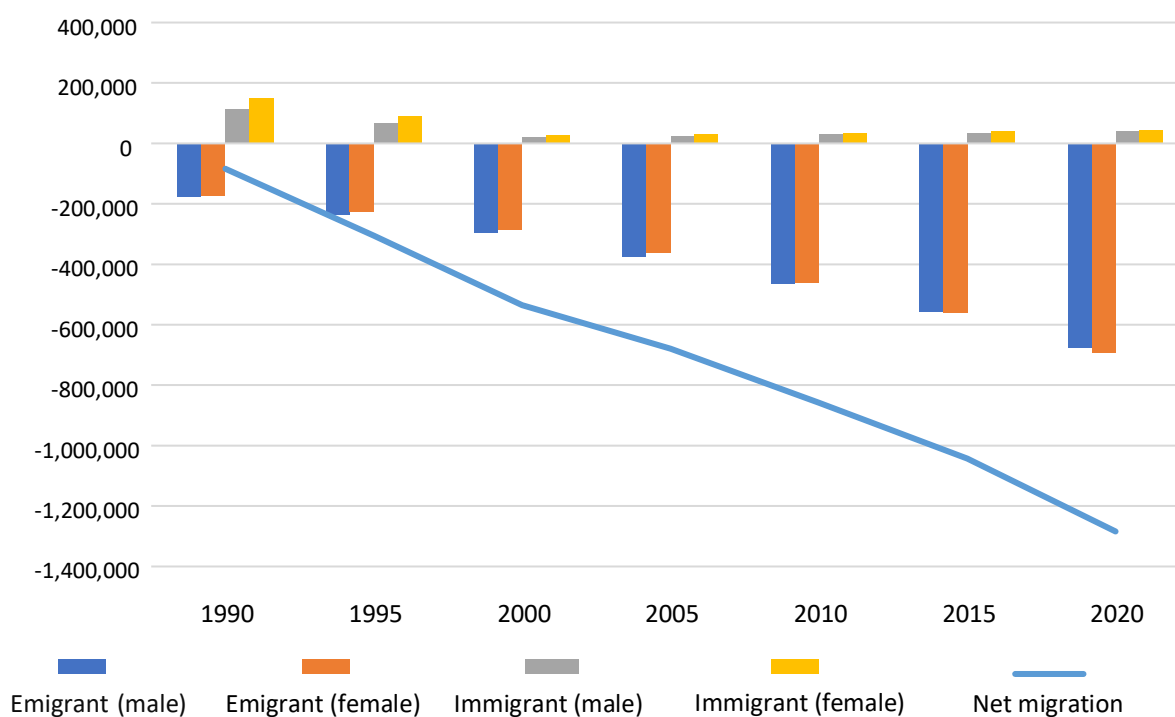
2.1 Migrant stock

Guatemala's net migration has been negative, at least since 1990, and has grown ever since. Between 1990 and 1995 negative net migration increased from -83,932 to -305,703, and it grew to -534,677 between 1995 and 2000. Thereafter, it has continued rising, albeit at a slower pace: to -679,501 between 2000 and 2005, to -858,512 between 2005 and 2010, to -1,043,263 between 2010 and 2015 and to -1,284,129 between 2015 and 2020 (see Figure 1).

Data from UNDESA show, that emigration has increased consistently throughout the entire 1990-2020 period, and that it has done so at a much faster pace than immigration, which began to recover in 2000, after the abrupt fall it experienced throughout the previous decade. Emigration flows figures express an increase of between 33% and 22% every five years, whereas since 2000, immigration flows have grown more modestly: between 16% and 13% every five years.

It is also worth noting that since 1990 there has been an important change in the migrants' profile from Guatemala. From 1990 to 2010 the number of male migrants was slightly higher (1%) than the number of female migrants. In 2015 and 2020, the trend was reversed, with 1% more female emigrants than male emigrants. In contrast, female immigrants have outnumbered male migrants to Guatemala throughout the entire 1990-2020 period, although the gap has been consistently narrowing: in 1990 there were 35% more female than male migrants to Guatemala; by 2020 the number of women immigrants was 11% higher than the men's.

Figure 1. Guatemala net migration, 1990-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration on UNDESA data

Guatemala's immigrant population comes mainly from five countries: El Salvador and Mexico are the main places of origin, followed by the U.S., Nicaragua, and Honduras. In the case of the Salvadoran population, the high figures recorded in 1990, nearly a quarter of a million people, respond to the civil war in that country and the population displacement it created. By 1995, while still active, the conflict had waned. This is reflected in the number of Salvadorans, which, although still high, had declined to almost half of that registered in 1990. The effects of the peace are evident in 2000, when the number of Salvadorans represented less than 10% of those recorded in 1995, and 5% of those in 1990. Since 2000, the Salvadoran population in Guatemala has been growing slowly but consistently. This has also been the case for the populations of the other four countries (see Table 2).

Table 2. Migration to Guatemala. Top five countries of origin, 1990-2020

Country of origin	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
El Salvador	236,655	124,346	12,037	14,364	16,691	18,301	20,683
Mexico	5,402	8,236	11,070	13,160	15,250	16,720	18,872
United States of America	5,822	5,639	5,456	6,473	7,514	8,239	9,299
Nicaragua	3,726	4,565	5,404	6,424	7,443	8,161	9,211
Honduras	4,768	5,032	5,295	6,294	7,292	7,995	9,023

Source: Authors' elaboration on UNDESA data (2023)

With regard to emigration, the United States dominates among the top five destination countries for Guatemalans. In 2020 the U.S. hosted more than 92% of the Guatemalan population abroad. The remaining 8% was distributed among Mexico, Belize, Canada, and Spain. This reveals a pattern of emigration mostly contained in the American continent, but outside Central America, the closest regional context.

Moreover, the differences in the variations of the Guatemalan populations in Mexico and the United States between the years 1990, 1995 and 2000 are striking and show that the U.S. did not receive the Guatemalan self-exiled and displaced population to the same extent that Mexico did. Geographical proximity explains this difference. A final aspect that deserves to be highlighted is the constant growth of the Guatemalan population in both Canada and Spain, and especially the high increase rate in Spain, where the number of Guatemalans grew more than ten-fold between 1990 and 2020 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Guatemalan population living abroad. Top five hosting countries, 1990-2020

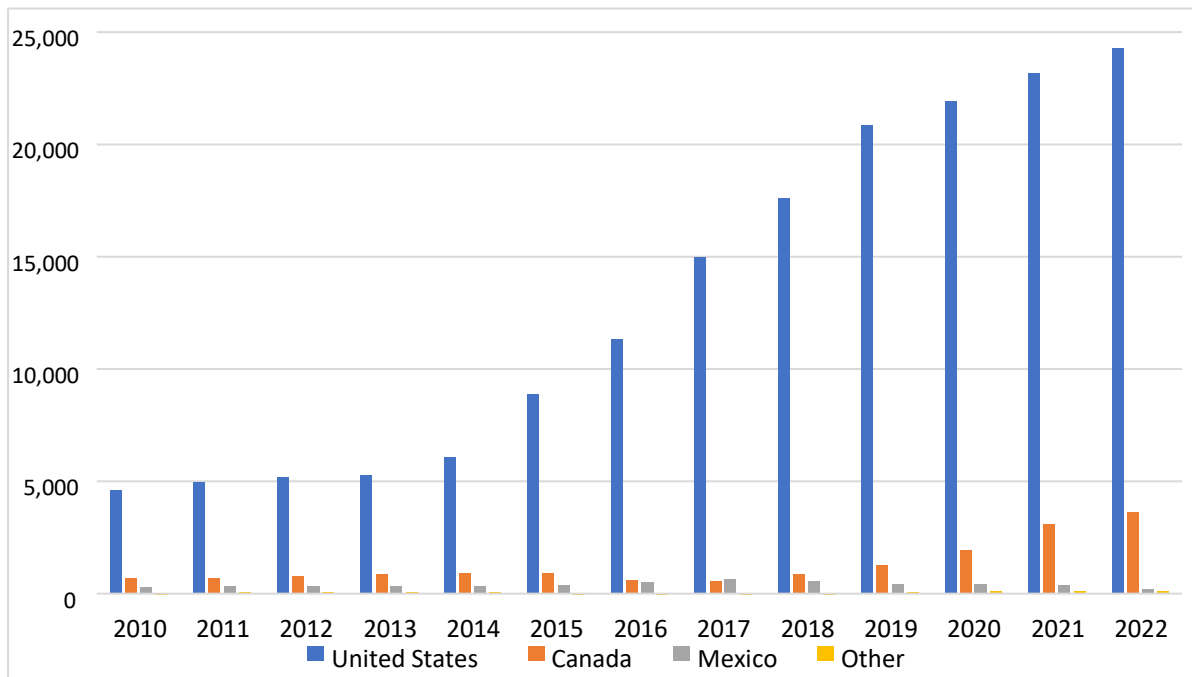
Country of origin	1990		1995		2000		2005		2010		2015		2020	
	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%
Total population	9,050,115		10,286,786		11,589,761		12,948,292		14,259,687		15,567,419		16,858,333	
United States of America	225,739	2.49%	357,929	3.48%	492,870	4.25%	643,349	4.97%	817,495	5.73%	991,516	6.37%	1,226,849	7.28%
Mexico	72,343	0.80%	49,676	0.48%	29,156	0.25%	29,329	0.23%	32,894	0.23%	42,221	0.27%	46,318	0.27%
Belize	12,650	0.14%	14,350	0.14%	16,058	0.14%	18,022	0.14%	19,995	0.14%	23,580	0.15%	26,767	0.16%
Canada	8,559	0.09%	11,127	0.11%	13,960	0.12%	14,401	0.11%	15,285	0.11%	17,169	0.11%	18,602	0.11%
Spain	975	0.01%	1,214	0.01%	1,977	0.02%	3,643	0.03%	6,440	0.05%	7,411	0.05%	10,002	0.06%
Total emigrant population	320,266	3.54%	434,296	4.22%	554,021	4.78%	708,744	5.47%	892,109	6.26%	1,081,897	6.95%	1,328,538	7.88%

Source: Authors' elaboration on UNDESA data (2023)

2.2 Asylum

The number of Guatemalan citizens granted refugee status has risen constantly from 5,631 in 2010 to 28,249 in 2022. The main country of asylum is the United States, where over 80% of the total Guatemalan refugee population is concentrated. It is followed by Canada and Mexico.

Figure 2. Refugees from Guatemala by country of destination, 2010-2022



Source: Authors' elaboration on UNDESA data (2023)

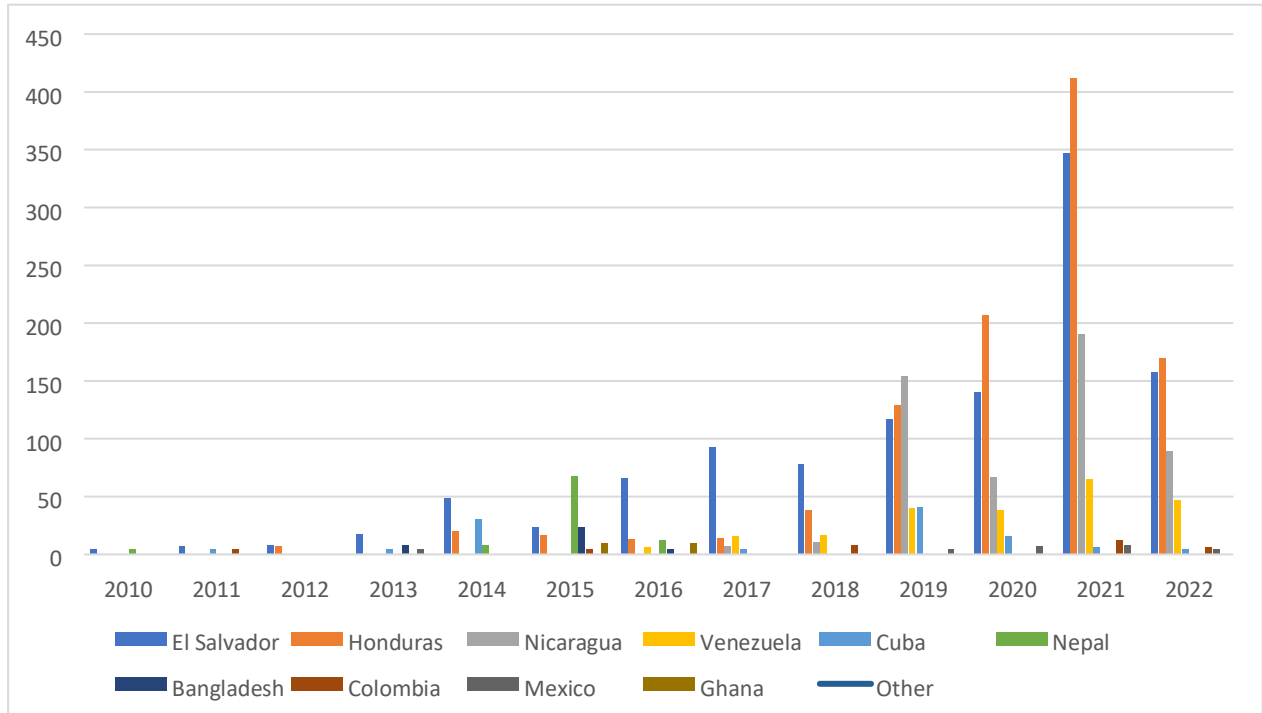
A look at the number of asylum seekers from Guatemala (as opposed to persons already granted refugee status) further shows the intensification of northbound flows, the preference of the U.S. as a country of destination and the emerging importance of asylum as a migration strategy from Guatemala. Between 2010 and 2012, the number of Guatemalan refugees exceeded the number of asylum seekers, although in a diminishing proportion each year. By 2013, the relationship was reversed, as 8,168 asylum applications from Guatemalans were received, nearly 3,000 more than the number of Guatemalan refugees in the U.S. From then on, the number of asylum claims grew exponentially: over 15,000 in 2014, over 26,000 in 2015, over 45,000 in 2016, and over 71,000 in 2017, a sum that quintupled the number of actual Guatemalan refugee status recipients in the U.S. that year. Since then, the number of asylum applications from Guatemalan citizens has continued to increase, being between five and six times higher than the number of refugees. With the highest number recorded to date, in 2022, over 154,000 asylum applications from Guatemalan citizens were received in the United States.

Guatemala's role as a country of asylum has also changed in recent years. Because of the Asylum Cooperation Agreement signed in 2019 with the United States (see above, p. 9), Guatemala committed to receive asylum seekers, especially from Honduras and El Salvador.

This is reflected in Figure 4, where low, yet increasing, numbers of asylum requests from Honduran and Salvadoran citizens are recorded. Interestingly, while there appears to be a pattern of Salvadoran requests that predated the ACA and was only intensified by it, before 2019, Hondurans had not been a major country of origin of asylum seekers in Guatemala. However, from 2020, Hondurans became the largest national group to apply for asylum in

Guatemala. Lastly, the new migration flows to Guatemala are also evidenced by the asylum applications from Nicaraguan and Venezuelan citizens who, fleeing the political and economic situations in their countries of origin, have joined in ever greater numbers the flows of people trying to get to the U.S. by land.

Figure. 3 Asylum applications in Guatemala by country of origin, 2010-2022



Source: Authors' elaboration on UNDESA data (2023)

3.0 Internal migration

Guatemala's internal migration dynamics comprises several distinct flows: rural-rural seasonal migration related to agricultural cycles, rural-urban migration driven by the force of attraction exerted by Guatemala City, the country's capital, and forced internal displacement related to both environmental factors and violence. Together, these flows give rise to a complex set of mobilities, some of which are also articulated with external migration. The following pages look at each of these flows in more detail.

Traditionally, the structure of Guatemala's agricultural sector has generated seasonal internal migration from the western highlands to the midlands and the fertile agricultural areas of the southern coast, where large-scale coffee, sugar cane and cocoa plantations demand intensive labor force. This is especially the case during the peak harvest period, which is September to February in the case of coffee, and November to February in the case of sugarcane (USAID, 2016). Despite household income in the interior of the country being highly dependent on agricultural labor, demand is unstable, due to the climatic variability that affects Guatemala.

For its part, rural-urban migration has too been a historical constant. There are permanent flows to the most important urban areas, especially to Guatemala City, which, as the country's

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capital, stands out as the largest with 1.2 million inhabitants. If the populations of the surrounding municipalities of Mixco, Villa Nueva and San Juan Sacatepéquez are also considered, the total population of Guatemala City's metropolitan area reaches 3.1 million people.

Because of its large size in comparison to the rest of the country's cities, and its dominant participation in Guatemala's economic life, Guatemala City has attracted significant immigration from the other departments. According to the 2018 census, Guatemala, Mixco and Villanueva are the three municipalities of Guatemala City's metropolitan area that have received most of this internal migration (INE, 2021a). Most of the internal immigrants to Guatemala City are between 25 and 64 years old. From the younger population (18-24 years) it is mostly men who have immigrated; in contrast, women outnumber the men in the 25-64 years and 65 years and over age groups.

Table 4. Internal migrant population living in Guatemala department, by municipality, 2018*

Municipality of residence in Guatemala department	Men			Women		
	18-24	25-64	≥ 65	18-24	25-64	≥ 65
Guatemala	1583	1094	2021	935	10940	2543
Santa Catarina Pinula	84	768	86	41	803	115
San José Pinula	81	748	69	64	998	104
San José del Golfo	2	72	17	3	101	23
Palencia	32	283	40	21	346	62
Chinautla	96	929	152	60	981	167
San Pedro Ayampuc	36	438	65	26	567	25
Mixco	603	4846	893	322	5336	1005
San Pedro Sacatepéquez	28	275	21	21	326	23
San Juan Sacatepéquez	113	1110	148	70	1141	113
San Raymundo	8	70	14	6	133	12
Chuarrancho	2	27	8	2	80	14
Fraijanes	59	512	76	35	580	103
Amatitlán	157	1305	152	97	1377	157
Villa Nueva	671	5324	708	347	5784	780
Villa Canales	173	1277	156	87	1285	185
San Miguel Petapa	203	1819	219	104	2051	255

*Only population born in Guatemala, 18 years old or older, that has not died, or lives abroad.

Population not born in Guatemala department, that migrated to the capital, by sex, age range and municipality of residence in Guatemala department.

Source: Registro Nacional de Personas (RENAP)

Administrative registry: Issuance of Personal Identification Card

Source: Verbatim copy of INE, 2021c

Additionally, some departmental capitals and other minor cities, such as Cobán (Alta Verapaz), Quetzaltenango and Escuintla, have also attracted significant domestic population inflows

because of their geographic location, which has made them intermediaries for commerce, services, and education (INE, 2020).

3.1 Climate-related migration

Internal migration has also been triggered by hydroclimatic events. In 2019, Guatemala was ranked 14th in the Global Climate Risk Index for 1998-2017 (Eckstein, Hutfils and Wings, 2018, p. 33). Moreover, as already stated, 11% of Guatemala's territory lies within the Central American Dry Corridor and is therefore exposed to cyclical droughts and heavy rainfall.

Cyclical extreme climate events, especially high temperatures and droughts, affect agricultural production and create food insecurity. According to FAO, in 2012, 453,044 hectares in Guatemala suffered from severe drought, and in 2016, 915,000 people were reported in a situation of severe food insecurity, with an additional 1.5 million being affected by the devastating effects of cyclical droughts (FAO, 2016).

While these factors are generally thought to trigger population displacements, the exact link between climate events and migration in Guatemala is still a matter of debate. After reviewing the literature on migration and climate change in the region, Riosmena (2023) concludes that environmental stress is more closely associated with short-distance internal migration, than with long-distance migration, be it internal or international. By contrast, rapid-onset events, like hurricanes, appear to be more strongly linked to international migration. These insights are confirmed by Lozano Sivisaca et al.'s study of the Dry Corridor (2015). In a later work, on extreme climate events and internal migration, Lozano Sivisaca et al. (2021) provide a more nuanced reading and state that the impact of such events on migration patterns varies depending on the nature of the event, with droughts appearing to decrease inter-municipal migration, while extreme rainfall events seem to increase migration on average (p. 144).

For their part, in their study of four rural communities in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, Milan and Ruano (2014) argue that, beyond the actual causal effect that climate events might have on migration, perceptions of climate change are an important factor influencing the decision to migrate, as "migration decisions which seem to be mainly caused by economic considerations are usually influenced by rainfall patterns and their impact on rain-fed agricultural production" (p. 66). Nevertheless, the authors also found that the local populations are strongly attached to their land, and only consider migration when "in-situ options are not profitable". In this context, migration appears to be considered as an extreme risk-management strategy and a last resort, often combined with other risk-management strategies. A 2019 study by Christian Aid on migration in the Dry Corridor similarly concludes that the apparent increase in migration from the region is associated with the lack of employment options in agriculture or uncertainty in harvest times due to rains or droughts, which are perceived to be a consequence of climate change (Christian Aid, 2019, p. 13).

Moreover, the literature suggests that slow-onset climate events, such as the cyclical droughts and extreme rainfall that characterize the Dry Corridor, are not major drivers of migration, because the local populations have developed adaptation strategies to these regular patterns of extreme climate conditions. It is the occurrence of atypical climate stress and rapid-onset

events, like hurricanes, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions that appear to provoke significant mobility.

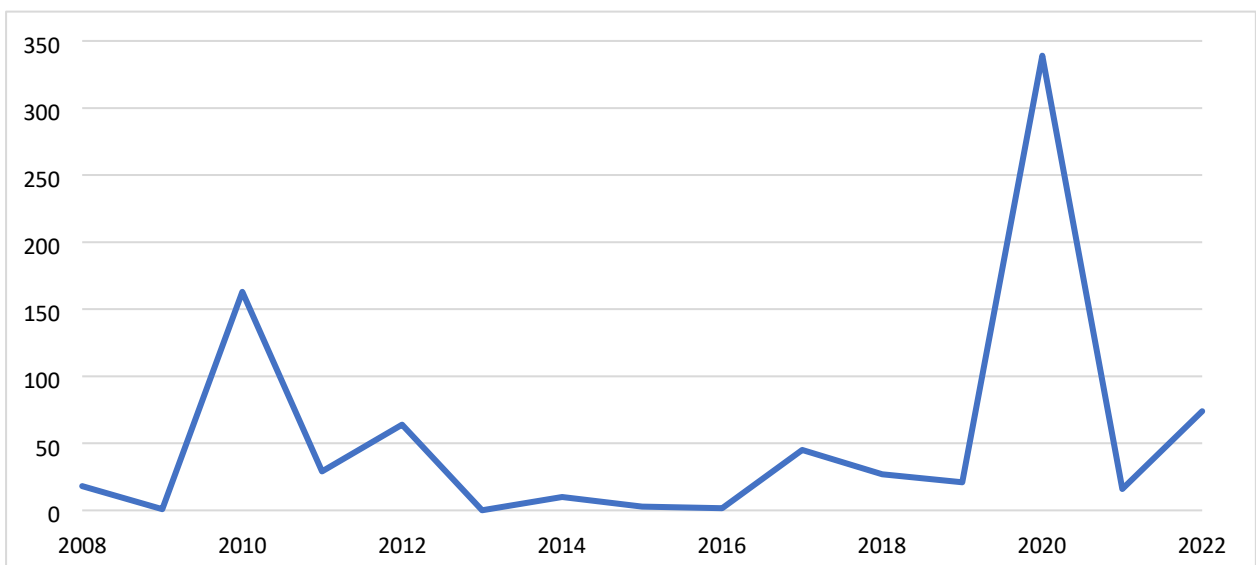
3.2 Forced internal displacement (FID)

Hurricanes, tropical storms, and heavy rains generate floods and landslides, resulting in the loss of human lives, the destruction of infrastructure and, more generally, deeply altering effects on livelihoods, in both rural and urban areas. Guatemala, like the rest of Central America, is particularly vulnerable to such events. Between 1998 and 2008, tropical storms hit Central America twice as often as in the previous fifty-year average. In 2005, Hurricane Stan killed more than 670 people in Guatemala and affected more than three million (Noticias ONU, 2005). In 2010 tropical storm Agatha caused enormous destruction, as did storm 12E a year later, and hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020.

In addition to these factors, Guatemala must cope with the consequences of its location on the Ring of Fire, the Pacific Rim volcanic system that causes earthquakes and volcano eruptions throughout the region. Since 2010, Guatemala has had to respond to the havoc wreaked by the eruptions of the Pacaya Volcano in 2010 and the Fuego Volcano in 2018. The latter, which is considered the most severe eruption in Guatemala in fifty years, left a toll of over 300 dead and affected over 1.7 million people.

In this context, forced internal displacement associated to disasters is a constant in Guatemala. Since 2008, when the first statistics were collected, there have been significant numbers of internally displaced persons for causes associated to disasters in 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2017, and for the entire 2018-2020 period.

Figure 4. Guatemala. Internally displaced persons. New displacements associated with disasters, 2008-2022 (in thousands)



Source: Authors' elaboration on The World Bank data (2023)

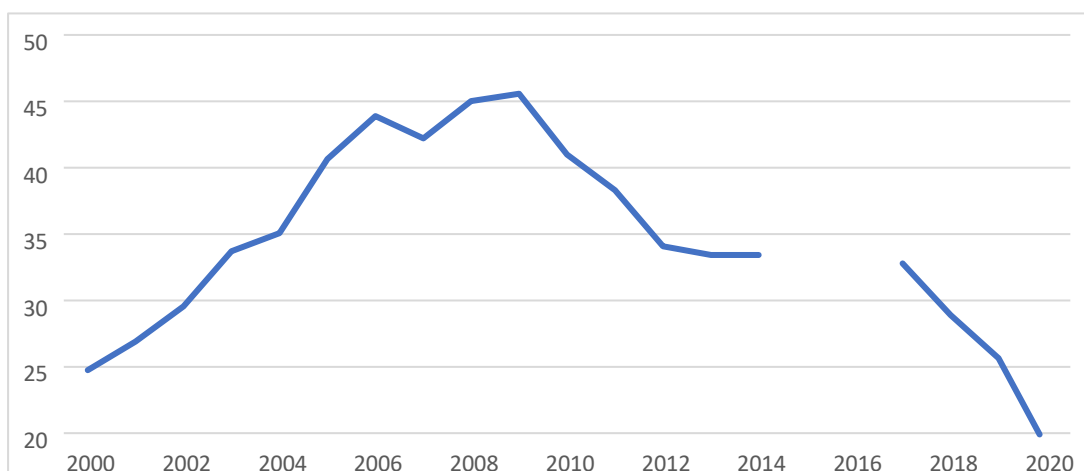
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It is important to stress that the literature cautions against drawing direct and simple causal relationships between extreme hazards (climate-related or geophysical) and migration. As Escribano points out, these phenomena “exacerbate vulnerabilities in complex manners and in intersection with social and economic factors [...] They do not occur in a vacuum” (2021, p. 7). In the case of Guatemala, factors such as poverty, violence, access to land and government support, among many others, affect the resilience of communities and their ability to cope with extreme events. The reviewed research offers some insights into these possible relationships. The MEMO project can bring this knowledge one step ahead.

For its part, forced internal displacement associated to conflict and violence is a constant feature of Guatemala’s migration dynamics. Since 2013, year for which the first records are available, the number of internally displaced persons associated with conflict and violence has been estimated at a constant 242,000 per year, with a light increase in 2016. Sardiza Miranda et al. (2019) point out that the Guatemalan government does not recognize that FID associated to violence occurs in the country, and therefore, this figure, which has not been updated in twenty years is, in fact, “decaying stock” (2019, p. 12) and no reliable indicator.

Violence rates in Guatemala used to be among the highest in the continent. In 2009 the homicide rate reached its peak with 45 homicides per 100,000 persons. Considering that the global 2009 and 2010 rates were 6 homicides per 100,000 persons, the magnitude of the lethal violence in Guatemala during those years becomes apparent. Since 2010 the homicide rate has been declining consistently to score 17 homicides per 100,000 persons in 2020, the lowest since records exist; nonetheless, it is still over 11 points higher than the global rate of 5.6. Moreover, as the Human Rights Ombudsperson in Guatemala has stated, intentional homicides are not the only indicator of the violence that pervades in Guatemala. Threats, extortion, gun non-lethal violence, intra-family and gender-based violence account for most of the forced internal displacements that occur in the country associated to violence (PDH, 2018).

Figure 5. Guatemala. Intentional-homicide rate per 100,000 persons 2000-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration on The World Bank data (2023)

Several factors converge to feed high violence rates in Guatemala. On the one hand, the civil war had long-lasting effects on the civilian population that suffered extreme violence and abuse at the hands of all parties to the conflict. On the other hand, Guatemala is plagued by violent organized criminal bands involved in drug trafficking, arms trafficking, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking. Especially those criminal groups that work for competing Mexican drug-trafficking cartels often lead violent fights against each other for control over the drug-trafficking routes (see Zepeda et al., 2018, p. 301-309). Often, achieving this control entails forcibly displacing the populations that are settled on the territories they aim to dominate. This is particularly evident in the department of Petén (see Zander and Dürr, 2011). Moreover, since many of these trafficking routes are on remote territory, the victims tend to be indigenous or Afro-Guatemalan peoples (Morales Gamboa, 2020, p. 47). *Maras*, the violent street gangs that are also responsible for a good share of the violence in Honduras and El Salvador, are also present in Guatemala, and specialize in contract-killing, kidnapping, and extortion. They have also been reported to target undocumented migrants in transit, particularly once they have crossed the border into Mexico.

Although no official figures or estimates exist on internal forced displacement or international migration associated to violence, Asencio and Kulikov (2017) found that people who have been victims of crime and live in neighborhoods controlled by gangs are more likely to consider leaving for another country. Nevertheless, as in other cases of research that examines the causes of migration, it is not possible to attribute international migration solely to violence. In the same work, Asencio and Kulikov conclude that, in addition to victimization, income and perceptions regarding the state and prospects of the national economy increase incentives to migrate.

In sum, internal migration flows in Guatemala respond to an array of drivers. Some of them, such as rural-rural migration or migration from rural areas to the capital and other major cities are historically long-standing mobility patterns, whose relationship with international migration is loose at best. Other internal flows, mainly those triggered by sudden-onset environmental phenomena, natural disasters, and violence appear to be more closely associated with external and long-distance cross-border migration. While the relationship is neither linear nor monocausal, acknowledging it appears as a sound starting point for the MEMO project to continue researching into the articulation of the diverse internal flows and their drivers with other factors of external migration.

4.0 Intra-regional migration dynamics

Approaching Guatemala's intra-regional migration dynamics requires a previous clarification, since there are several regional contexts in which these flows take place. To begin with, there is the cross-border region formed by tightly integrated border economies and societies in the southwest of Guatemala and the southeast of Mexico. There is too a Northern Central American region composed of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, as well as the broader Central American region, which also includes Nicaragua and Panama. Finally, it is possible to

conceive of the region as the entire American continent, spanning from Chile, in the south, to Canada in the north. In all these cases, migration flows can be characterized as regional; nonetheless, they are very different in nature, magnitude, and intensity.

In what follows we look at the main intra-regional flows and focus on the short-distance cross-border migration on the Guatemala-Mexico border, the authorized long-distance labor migration to the United States and Canada, and the unauthorized long-distance migration bound for the U.S. and in transit through Mexico.

4.1 Short-distance cross-border migration

Historically, Guatemala's southwest and Mexico's southeast have been economically and socially integrated. Since the late 19th century, a vibrant agricultural labor market has existed in the region providing thousands of jobs for Guatemalan agricultural workers. According to estimates cited by Ordóñez Morales (2005, p. 170), at the beginning of the 2000s, between 60,000 and 150,000 Guatemalan citizens from the departments of San Marcos, Huehuetenango, and Retalhuleu, crossed into Mexico every year to work as day laborers in sugar mills, and coffee and banana plantations (see also Arriola, 1995, p. 157). More recent forms of labor insertion include the seasonal migration of rural population from western Guatemala to the Mexican states of Campeche and Quintana Roo, to work in the construction sector and the participation of Guatemalan labor force in the informal trade and services sectors, especially in Tapachula.

Anguiano and Trejo Peña (2007) identify at least three types of cross-border migration flows in this region: (1) the circular and short-distance labor mobility; (2) the medium-distance mobility to locations farther away from the border, in central Mexico; and (3) the long-distance mobility to northern Mexico, either as a final destination or temporarily, while in transit to the United States. According to the authors, from 2004 to 2006 nearly half of the Guatemalan citizens' stay in Mexico had lasted a day or less, a clear indicator of the intensity of Guatemalan cross-border labor mobility (p. 53).

Since then, Tonatiuh Guillén López has identified significant changes in these patterns. Citing data from *Encuesta sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México-Emif Sur* (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte et al., n.d.), Guillén notes that in 2006, about 305,000 crossing events for labor purposes were registered at the Mexico-Guatemala border. By 2014, that number had more than doubled and reached an all-time high of 774,000 crossing events. Although from 2014 onwards the figure declined, it remained high throughout the 2015-2020 period, with an average of 700,000 crossing events for labor purposes per year (2021, pp. 79 and 83).

The higher number of crossings for labor purposes is not the only change worth highlighting. The occupational sectors of the Guatemalan migrant workers in Mexico have also changed in recent years (see Table 5). The most remarkable shift took place in the agriculture and construction sectors, with the latter increasing in nearly the same proportion as the former decreased between 2015 and 2019.

Table 5. Guatemalan cross-border laborers' economic activity in Mexico, 2015 and 2019 compared

	2015	2019
Agriculture	73.1%	51.9%
Construction	7.7%	18.1%
Trade	9.5%	11.5%
Domestic work	4.4%	6.1%

Source: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte et al. 2020, p. 22

These transformations have been mirrored by changes in circular mobility patterns. In contrast to the early 2000s, when the stays in Mexico of more than 50% of the people who crossed the border for labor purposes had lasted less than 24 hours, by 2011, the percentage of people who declared that their stay had lasted more than a month doubled. More interestingly, that percentage began to increase as the percentage of people that stayed in Mexico less than 24 hours declined. In Guillén López's interpretation, these data suggest that while the Guatemalans working in Mexico have progressively lengthened their stay in that country, they have not cancelled the return to their communities of origin (Guillén López 2021, p. 88; see also El Colegio de la Frontera Norte et al. 2020, p. 24).

As reported by Emif Sur in 2019, 52.8 % of the Guatemalan labor migrants who entered Mexico came from Huehuetenango, 30.3% from San Marcos, 10.7% from Quetzaltenango, and the rest from other departments. Within this population, men accounted for 84.3 % of the total and women for 15.7%, while the average age was 35 years (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte et al. 2020, 18).

This circular migration is, for the most part, authorized. In 2019, 84.4% of the Guatemalans that crossed the border for labor purposes entered Mexico with some type of permit. However, only 37.8% of them did so with the Visiting Border Worker Card (Tarjeta de Visitante Trabajador Fronterizo - TVTF), which authorizes the holders to work in Mexico, provided they can produce a written job offer. In contrast, 60.8% of this labor migration entered with the Regional Visitor Card (TVR), which grants permission to stay in Mexico's border states for as long as seven days, but does not allow undertaking paid activities (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte et al., 2020, p. 18).

Finally, it is worth noting that the immigration interdiction measures implemented at the Mexican border since 2018, together with the COVID-19 pandemic, had a substantial impact on the cross-border labor market and, more generally on cross-border social and economic life (see Zepeda, 2019). The already declining number of TVTF issued by the Mexican government fell from 10,015 in 2019 to 3,677 in 2021. By 2022, the 4,399 TVTF issued were less than half of those issued in 2019, and one seventh of the 28,628 issued in 2010 (UPM, n.d.).

4.2 Authorized long-distance cross-border migration

While most of the migration flows from Guatemala to the United States and Canada are unauthorized, (see section below), a modest number of Guatemalan workers travels to these two countries to perform low-skilled jobs under existing (temporary) migrant worker programs.

In the U.S., both the H2-A visa for agricultural workers and the H2-B visa for non-agricultural workers, created in 1986, allow their bearers to stay in the country for up to six months. Although they are said to be available to many nationalities, over 90% of these visas are ultimately granted to Mexican workers. In July 2019, the Guatemalan and U.S. governments signed a bilateral agreement creating a temporary agricultural workers program aimed at facilitating the workers' ethical recruitment and protection (Ministerio del Trabajo, 2019). Notwithstanding, in Fiscal Year 2021, of the 258,000 H2-A and 95,053 H2-B visas issued by the Department of Homeland Security, only 3% were granted to Guatemalan laborers (Congressional Research Service, 2020; Martin, 2022). In October 2022, President Biden announced the increase in availability of temporary work permits by up to 64,716 to complete a total of 130,716 by Fiscal Year 2023. 20,000 of them are supposed to be earmarked for workers from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Associated Press, 2022).

The government of Canada has also created several temporary workers programs. Guatemalan citizens may apply to the Guatemalan Temporary Agricultural Worker to Canada (TAWC) program, the Stream for Lower Skilled Occupations (SLSO), both created in 2002. Although Guatemalans have benefitted progressively from access to these visas, their numbers are still dismal: 5,580 in 2015, 6,505 in 2016, 8,240 in 2017, 9,810 in 2018 and 11,925 in 2019 (Canada, 2023; Clemens, 2021; Cockram et al., 2021).

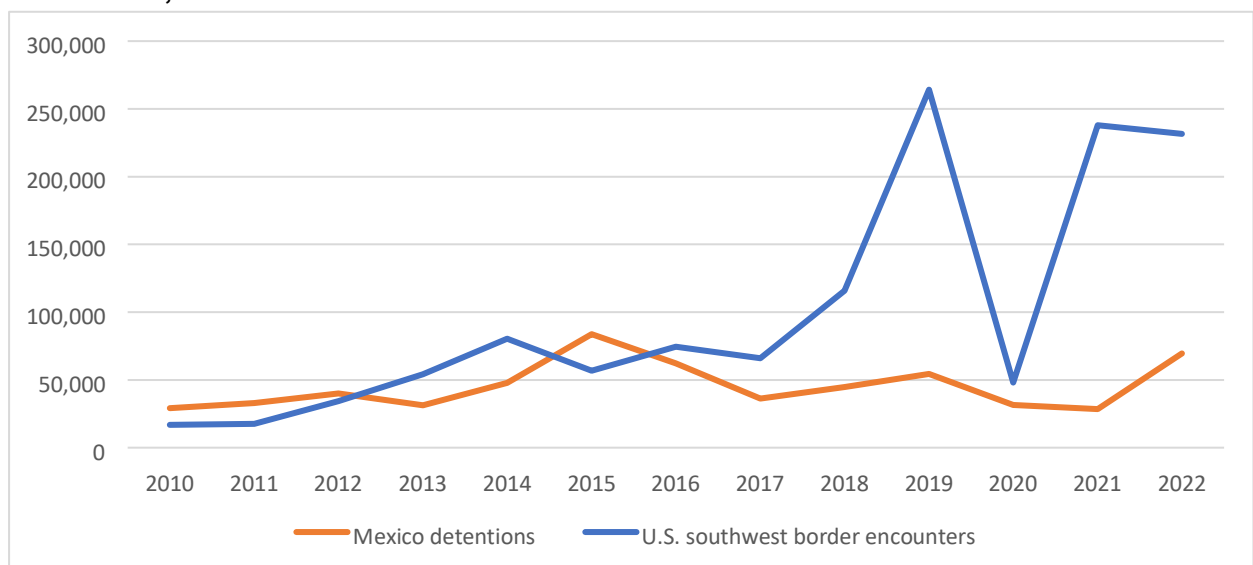
In the U.S. and the Canadian temporary worker programs, intermediaries play an important and critical role. In both cases, privatization of the recruitment process and lack of government oversight often result in corruption, exploitation, and abuse of the workers. In the U.S. case, American employers may hire legitimate recruiters or contractors to help them find the workers they need. However, the process is opaque and middlemen, mostly in the countries of origin, get involved as gatekeepers of the recruitment process itself, charging "recruitment fees" of up to USD 2,000 (Vasquez, 2023).

In the case of the TAWC, and precisely because the Guatemalan government sought to protect Guatemalan workers by relying on an experienced organization, the implementation of the program was left in the hands of the International Organization for Migration, for the Guatemalan government, and the growers' association *Fondation des Entreprises pour la Mainoeuvre Étrangère* (FERME) for Canada. Nonetheless, in 2010, and amid accusations of corruption and mismanagement against the IOM representative in Guatemala, the contract with IOM was terminated and FERME became the sole responsible for the implementation of the program. As in the U.S. case, FERME works with a series of hiring agents in Guatemala, that it does not control and that incur in the same corrupt practices of selling access to the recruitment process (Gabriel and Macdonald, 2018; Muir 2015; Valarezo 2014), thus burdening the migrant workers with impossible debts even before their journey has started.

4.3 Unauthorized long-distance cross-border migration

Since 2010, there has been a steady flow of Guatemalan migration to the United States, most of which is unauthorized and transits through Mexico. As Figure 6 shows, detentions in Mexico are only a fraction of those in the U.S.; nevertheless, they mirror the pattern of detentions in the U.S. with two exceptions: in 2018 and 2019, when the migrant caravans crossed the Mexican territory and were not allowed into the U.S.; and in 2021, when Joe Biden's advent to the U.S. presidency unleashed high expectations that the Trump administration's stringent migration interdiction policies would finally be eliminated. Contrary to such expectations, the MPPs remained in place until August 2022, and Title 42 until May 2023, leading to high numbers of detentions and encounters of Guatemalan citizens since 2021.

Figure 6. Guatemalan citizens detained in Mexico and U.S. southwest border encounters, 2010-2020



Source: Authors' elaboration on UPM and CBP data.

Intermediaries, in this case, illicit ones, are an important component of this long-distance cross-border migration dynamic. As border and immigration controls increase in Mexico and the United States, migrating has become more difficult. New routes must be found, and because they are ever more distant from populated areas and main roads, where immigration controls abound, they are also much more dangerous. Intermediaries, or migrant smugglers, are often seen as service providers who will enhance the chances of success and will help to make the journey safer (Sánchez, 2018). But as controls become tighter, the old *polleros* have given way to the *coyotes*, human smugglers with criminal connections (for more on the difference between the two, see Casillas, 2023), who often kidnap, extort, and abuse the migrants they are supposed to bring to safety on the other side of the border.

Coyotes charge exorbitant fees for their services, which may include several attempts at crossing or just one, transportation by plane, bus, or foot, and lodging in different types of accommodation. The fees vary accordingly, with an all-inclusive high-end special trip costing up to USD 15,000 and a simple "trip to the border" up to USD 1,950 (Roldán, coord. 2020). These prices reflect the increasing dangers of the route. Furthermore, there appears to be a

process of professionalization of *coyotes*, as they now must investigate U.S. legislative changes, and anticipate the possible reactions of U.S. immigration agents. On many occasions *coyotes* even provide systematic training to migrants before they embark on their journey.

In order to curb undocumented migration, in February 2022, the Congress of Guatemala approved a series of reforms to the Migration Law, which include the criminalization of *coyotes*. The reforms typify the crime of illicit human smuggling and toughen the penalties. Those who get convicted can get up to thirty years in prison (Congreso de la República, 2022).

We would like to conclude this section by highlighting, once more, the multiplicity of flows that take place within the multiplicity of regions Guatemala is part of. It is essential to understand each of these flows individually in their nature and context, as well as the factors that influence them. However, no analysis of Guatemalan migration flows would be complete without problematizing the possible interaction between these intra-regional flows. It is certainly a future task for the MEMO project to attain a better and more nuanced understanding of Guatemala's intra-regional migration dynamics.

5.0 Inter-continental migration dynamics

As already mentioned, migration to and from Guatemala has traditionally taken place within the American continent, with the United States at the top of the list of destination countries. In 2018, the population census recorded a small number of authorized migrants who applied for temporary or permanent residence in Guatemala; among them, 919 were from Asia, mainly from South Korea, China and Taiwan; 594 were from Europe, mostly from Spain; 21 were from Africa and four from Oceania (INE, 2021a). Beyond these authorized flows, intercontinental migration to Guatemala has varied enormously since 2010. Because of its geographic location, Guatemala is, in fact, an almost obligatory point of transit on the land route to the United States. It is therefore possible to assume that most intercontinental flows are both transit and undocumented flows to the U.S.

Unfortunately, there are no publicly available statistics of transit migration in Guatemala. However, Mexican migrant detention records may be used as a proxy, as it is safe to assume that undocumented extracontinental migrants detained in Mexico arrived through the southern border and, therefore, crossed Guatemala's territory.

Mexico's National Migration Institute (INAMI) reports a great diversity of countries of origin among detained extracontinental migrants (see Table 6). A careful analysis allows the identification of some patterns and trends. In 2010, INAMI recorded a relatively high number of extracontinental migrants. Heading the list were the citizens from Eritrea (723 persons), India (544 persons), Somalia (311 persons), China (176 persons), and Ethiopia (167 persons). In contrast, between 2011 and 2014 the number of extracontinental migrants dropped significantly, although Chinese citizens continued to be present throughout those four years (979 detained in total).

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Between 2015 and 2019, the number of Asian migrants increased both abruptly and consistently. In that five-year period, over 3,000 Nepalese, 5,000 Bangladeshi, and close to 14,000 Indian citizens were detained by the Mexican immigration authorities, after crossing the border with Guatemala. The records of 2018, when the first migrant caravans took place, are particularly striking. In that year alone, 4,385 Indian, 1,537 Bangladeshi, and 800 Nepalese migrants were apprehended in Mexico. One year later, African migrants were detained in unprecedented numbers: 3,124 Cameroonians, 1,822 Congolese, 827 Angolans, and 359 Eritreans. Thereafter, and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the much stricter immigration controls implemented by all the countries in the region, intercontinental migration dropped dramatically to low three-figure numbers, and it has remained low until today.

Table 6. Guatemala. Top ten countries of origin of extracontinental transit migration (as inferred from Mexican migrant detention records) 2010-2022

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Eritrea	723	Cuba 762	Cuba 3247	Cuba 1365	Cuba 2097	Cuba 9623	Haiti 1778	India 3423	India 4385	Cuba 7105	Haiti 1411	Haiti 13541	Venezuela 25603
India	544	Ecuador 546	Ecuador 697	Ecuador 916	Ecuador 1166	Ecuador 865	Cuba 4338	Haiti 1190	Bangladesh 1537	Haiti 3891	Cuba 1179	Cuba 6087	Colombia 14807
Ecuador	496	India 451	Colombia 239	China 601	Bangladesh 632	Somalia 864	India 2491	Cuba 828	Cameroon 950	Cameroon 3124	Colombia 503	Venezuela 2556	Cuba 11036
Cuba	465	Colombia 235	Somalia 176	Somalia 339	Somalia 403	Bangladesh 702	Congo 1009	Bangladesh 649	Nepal 800	India 3115	Ecuador 390	Brasil 1322	Ecuador 10696
Somalia	311	China 176	Haiti 112	Colombia 246	Colombia 311	Ghana 631	Nepal 890	Eritrea 636	Congo 704	Congo 1822	Congo 212	Ecuador 1015	Perú 4517
Colombia	310	Eritrea 136	China 104	Rep. Dominicana 116	Ghana 169	India 574	Ecuador 797	Colombia 630	Colombia 632	Bangladesh 1469	Bangladesh 186	Bangladesh 751	Brasil 2705
Dominicana	210	Venezuela 112	Dominicana 96	Perú 104	Dominicana 168	Nepal 507	Bangladesh 757	Nepal 616	Eritrea 539	Angola 827	Venezuela 183	Senegal 402	Haiti 1723
China	176	Perú 98	Venezuela 80	India 101	India 140	Colombia 437	Ghana 606	Cameroon 425	Cuba 492	Colombia 682	Chile 160	Rusia 299	Dominicana 702
Etiopia	167	Dominicana 91	Eritrea 61	Venezuela 85	China 98	Pakistán 233	Colombia 542	Congo 316	Haiti 448	Sri Lanka 551	Brasil 145	Ghana 283	Angola 701
Chile	164	Somalia 83	Perú 59	Bangladesh 84	Perú 93	Dominicana 173	Pakistan 448	Ecuador 233	Venezuela 288	Brasil 488	Ghana 100	Dominicana 281	Rumania 655

Source: Data from UPM

The new, unauthorized migration flows to Guatemala are evidence of the reach of human smuggling networks. Given the distances covered, it is unlikely for one single smuggler to accompany, for instance, a group of migrants from Africa to the U.S. Like other transnational

enterprises, human smuggling now relies on a series of contacts and service providers along the routes. Migrant journeys have been documented that depart from Turkey to Moscow and from Moscow to Cuba, to then continue by sea to Honduras and from there to Guatemala by land (Ureste, 2016). Similarly, police findings have recorded extremely sophisticated migrant smuggling routes from Asia, with the journey beginning in Dubai, whence migrants are flown to Brazil, then on to Colombia and from there transported by land to Panama. After crossing the Central American Isthmus, the migrants reach Guatemala, where they are housed in homes or warehouses in the capital, until their transfer to Mexico, the last stopover before the journey continues to the United States by land (Asmann, 2017).

A relatively new phenomenon, extra-continental migration to Guatemala is an increasingly important feature of the regional migration dynamic. Yet its significance transcends the region; for extra-continental migration to Guatemala not only connects with transit migration flows in other Central American countries but is also evidence of the flows and routes of global migration to the United States.

6.0 Decision-making for migration

The literature on decision-making for migration in Guatemala does not abound; however, among the few authors who have investigated this topic there is consensus that, in general, people prefer not to migrate, as most are strongly attached to their communities and would stay if they could.

According to the literature there are important factors that influence the perception that staying put is not an option and, therefore, the decision to migrate. First, there are family networks. All other things being equal, having a family member who is an international migrant appears to make an important difference between those who migrate and those who decide to stay (Asencio and Kulikov, 2017; Milan and Ruano 2014, Lozano Sivisaca et al., 2020). A number of other objective criteria, such as socio-demographics and economic conditions, have differentiated impacts. In their broad-ranging study on the relationship between threats to human security and migration in Guatemala, Asencio and Kulikov (2017) found that every year in age decreases the odds of migration, as does being female and being white (*ladino*). In contrast the odds increase if the person is single or divorced, and if they are from the northwestern region of the country. The level of education and residing in a rural or urban area appear to have no influence.

With regard to economic factors, Asencio and Kulikov (2017) found that having a low total monthly household income increases the odds that people will intend to migrate. Nonetheless, congruous with other research on the region, they note that it is not the poorest households among whom the intentions to migrate are the highest, for migration itself requires some form of capital that the poorest do not possess.

According to Asencio and Kulikov's study, having been a victim of crime and living in a neighborhood affected by gangs also appears to have statistical significance when factored

into the decision-making process to migrate; meanwhile institutional factors such as corruption, government performance and efficiency appear not to have any weight. These trends are confirmed by Spohn's research (2017) on the impact of young people's access to development projects and migration in Guatemala. Of the few respondents in Spohn's study who had access to such projects, none felt that it influenced their decision to leave (or stay). Interestingly, those who had not been beneficiaries of the projects –a majority of the people surveyed-- expressed they would not have migrated had they had access to them. These findings bring us to what appears to be the most significant factor: the psychological one.

In most of the studies we reviewed on decisions for migration, perceptions and expectations, both positive and negative, were found to play a significant role. For instance, Rojas Wiesner (2023) mentions the “magnet effect,” namely, expectations –be they well-founded or not-- that migration controls will be relaxed after a certain decision or event may induce/trigger mobility. Similarly, Milan and Ruano (2014) highlight the role of perceptions that no profitable in-situ options are available as a determinant in the decision to migrate. Ordóñez stresses the influence of what he terms “the psycho-social factor of despair” (2021, p. 7) – i.e., the perception that upward social mobility is blocked and/or the country's economic and political situation will worsen. In the same vein, a Catholic Relief Service (2020) study indicates that unemployment or poor employment prospects can be a determining factor. Lastly, even the relationship between climate and migration appears to be mediated by perceptions. In their research on Cabricán, Quetzaltenango, Milan and Ruano (2014) discovered that migration decisions, which seem to be caused primarily by economic considerations, are strongly influenced not only by actual rainfall patterns, but also by expectations of how such patterns will evolve.

7.0 Discussion of findings of the literature review and setting a research agenda

In keeping with the MEMO project general approach to the analysis of country-specific migration dynamics, we now present a synthesis of the main periods of immigration, emigration and transit migration in Guatemala and attempt a brief characterization of the migrant populations involved:

Guatemala's net migration has been negative, since at least 1990. Immigration is, therefore, not a salient feature of Guatemalan contemporary migration dynamics. Nevertheless, between the late 1970s and the early 1990s Guatemala received significant numbers of Salvadoran asylum seekers and self-exiles who were fleeing the civil war in their country. While these inflows were not enough to offset the large number of emigrants that Guatemala's own internal armed conflict caused throughout the same period, they help explain why the difference between the number of immigrants and the number of emigrants increased abruptly after the end of the civil war in El Salvador and the return of Salvadoran asylum seekers to their country.

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In contrast, emigration from Guatemala has been a constant since the 1960s. The civil war that followed the U.S.-backed overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 created widespread internal displacement and scores of asylum seekers and self-exiles. In general, this exiled population consisted of young people, students, intellectuals, and middle-class individuals, many of whom found shelter in cities in Mexico and the United States. The intensification of the conflict in the early 1980s, and the persecution of the indigenous population of Quiché and Alta Verapaz created a new wave of refugees with a different profile. Over 200,000 Mayans fled state-led violence and settled in the southern Mexico state of Chiapas. These refugees were primarily indigenous, rural, poor, and migrated in family units. Many of them returned to Guatemala at the end of the conflict, but many others, especially those with school-aged children, stayed in Mexico.

It is possible to identify a second period of emigration from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. This emigration was the product of the economic instability and population impoverishment brought about by the structural reforms that successive Guatemalan post-conflict administrations implemented and was further exacerbated by the effects of Hurricane Mitch in 1998. During this period, migration from Guatemala was mainly economic and to the United States. In addition to a large share of young, male, poor, rural migrants, these new flows comprised urban residents and, increasingly, women.

Since the mid-2000s emigration from Guatemala has continued to grow at a steady pace, making it difficult to speak of a specific “period”. It is, rather, the dominant feature of contemporary migration dynamics in Guatemala. In addition to the economic factors that drove emigration in the previous decade, rising levels of criminal violence and the effects of natural disasters have made livelihoods in Guatemala more difficult and external migration a more appealing strategy, despite its well-known risks.

Within this general trend of continuous emigration, since 2010 there have been three moments when emigration has peaked: (1) 2012-2015, when previously unseen streams of Guatemalan unaccompanied girls, boys and adolescents reached the U.S. border; (2) 2018-2019, marked by the mobilization of tens of thousands of Guatemalan men, women, children and entire family units who joined the migrant caravans; and (3) 2021 to the present, when expectations about a more migrant-friendly policy raised by Joe Biden’s advent to the U.S. presidency, combined with actual policy changes, such as the end of the MPP, in August 2022, and Title 42, in May 2023, triggered unprecedented numbers of Guatemalan migrants seeking to reach the United States. These developments, that have taken place within a decade, might well signal a more profound and lasting change in Guatemalan emigration dynamics.

Finally, transit migration has also been a constant characteristic of Guatemala’s migration dynamics, insofar as the country’s geographic location makes it a necessary stop along the overland route from South and Central America to the United States. However, transit flows had never elicited much attention from either the Guatemalan government and society, or from the international community. The 2018-2019 migrant caravans changed this and marked the beginning of a new role for Guatemala as a country of transit in the global U.S.-bound migration dynamics.

After the first caravans, composed mainly of Salvadoran, Honduran and Guatemalan migrants, migrants from other Latin American countries, especially Cuba and Haiti, as well as from Africa and Asia, joined successive caravans in ever larger numbers. While mobility restrictions implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic temporarily interrupted these transit flows, they peaked again in 2021 and continued growing throughout 2022 and the first half of 2023, when news about the definitive suspension of Title 42 triggered a massive migrant flow with the U.S. as its destination.

7.1 Dynamics between the main migration corridors

The circular labour flow on the Guatemala-Mexico border has its own dynamic and until recently, remained unaffected by long-distance migration flows. Starting in 2018, because of the control measures implemented to stop the caravans, in addition to pandemic-related border closures and other public health policies that have impacted migration, this regional cross-border mobility was significantly hampered, and it has not yet recovered its pre-2018 levels.

In turn, the transit corridors through Guatemala that connect Mexico, in the north, and Honduras and El Salvador, in the south, have now been integrated into the global U.S.-bound routes with origin in Asia and Africa. This is the case of the migrant route that, following the Pacific coast, connects Guatemala's border with El Salvador to the city of Tecún Umán on the border with Mexico. Similarly, the El Corinto and El Florido crossings on the border with Honduras mark the beginning of migration corridors from eastern Guatemala to Mexico through the departments of Petén, Quiché and most prominently, Huehuetenango (see Map 1 on page 3 of this document). These routes, which had traditionally been used by northbound Central American transit migrants, are now also used by Caribbean, Asian, and African migrants on their way to the U.S. In using these routes, these migrants take advantage of an already existing unauthorized migration infrastructure developed over the years by local populations, migrant smugglers and, increasingly, organized crime groups that now compete among themselves for control over the coveted transit routes.

7.2 Gaps in our knowledge and future research agenda

Several factors hinder research on migration in Guatemala. First, it is important to cite the difficult access to reliable and consistent data. If any data exists, it tends to be deficient and/or unavailable to the general public. As such, it is challenging to assess authorized migration to and from Guatemala, based on official statistics. The task is even more daunting in the case of unauthorized migration. In order to overcome these obstacles, researchers must resort to using estimations and/or relying on proxies. Moreover, because of the complex criminal industries that have developed in the region around migration, fieldwork in this area entails serious risks for the researchers.

Beyond these practical considerations, and based on our review of the literature, we propose a series of topics that ought to be further researched to enhance our understanding of migration dynamics in Guatemala and the country's role in the regional and global migration

systems. Following the MEMO project concept framework to the study of migration (Triandafyllidou et al., 2023), we group these topics under the headings of macro, meso and micro levels:

a) Macro level (social, economic, political, demographic and environmental drivers of migration):

While the literature we reviewed offers many insights into the macro-level drivers of migration, evidence on the role of some of these drivers and their interactions is still inconclusive; hence further researching these topics appears as a necessary and promising endeavor.

This is the case of the impact of climate events and natural disasters on migration from Guatemala. While there is a solid academic production on this topic (see i.a. Lozano Sivisaca et al., 2015; Lozano Sivisaca et al., 2021, Milan and Ruano, 2014), it is still insufficient to determine the extent to which climate events trigger different types of migration. More research on this area is needed, as is the factoring of time (immediate mobility, delayed mobility –after two, three, six months--) to understand the ways in which climate and other natural events affect migration.

There is also a large area of opportunity in the study of the relationship between internal migration (be it economic or forced by disasters or violence) and international migration. Literature for other countries in the region suggests there are strong links between the two types of migration/flows. Researching this relationship in the case of Guatemala could be relevant in itself, as well as to enhance our understanding of regional multi-scalar dynamics.

The political drivers of migration from Guatemala constitute another area of research that is yet to fully develop. At the national (Guatemalan) level, much is still to be understood about the relationship between corruption, the weak rule of law, and migration, especially international one. Although this relationship is often mentioned in the literature (Alvarado, 2021; Payan, 2022; Ruiz, 2021; Wolf, 2020), further research is needed to establish what mechanisms are at play and how they interact with other drivers.

In the same vein, we need to have a better comprehension of the political motivations to either curb or stimulate migration. In remittance-dependent countries, such as Guatemala, there appears to be little incentive to create the conditions for people to stop emigrating. A thorough study on how Guatemala's remittance dependency fosters migration may help illuminate the often-neglected discussion on political will and the political and economic profiteers of migration.

At the international level, political drivers in the form of third countries' migration policies have become increasingly important. For instance, policies such as DACA and the rollback and reinstating of Title 42, along with political events such as the start of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's and Joe Biden's presidencies, triggered unexpected migration flows, not only within the region, but also from other continents. More research is needed to uncover the impacts – both expected and unexpected—of policies on migration flows within the region and beyond.

Similarly, the new role of asylum as an alternative to undocumented migration, especially in countries which, like Guatemala, were pressed into signing third safe country agreements,

deserves further investigation. Given the increasing number of asylum seekers in Guatemala, it is necessary to explore what role asylum seeking plays in people's migration trajectories.

b) Meso level (intermediaries and institutions):

The role of family networks and social capital in Guatemalans' decision to migrate must be researched in more depth. While some of the reviewed works (Asencio and Kulikov, 2017; Milan and Ruano 2014, Lozano Sivasaca et al., 2020) find that social networks/capital are a determining factor in migration decisions from Guatemala, it is important to examine whether this insight applies equally to Guatemalan flows that have travelled in caravans since 2018. Since these contingents have included an increasing number of family units, it is possible to hypothesize the emergence of a migration strategy which is unrelated to pre-existing ties with the host country.

c) Micro level (decision-making for migration):

Related to the previous point, there is still ample room to research the changing sociodemographic profile of Guatemalan migrants, as well as the reasons that lead ever more women and children to emigrate. The impact of such migration on the communities of origin and its relationship with new migrations flows is also a factor that merits attention.

Another important area of opportunity in the research of the micro-level triggers of migration from Guatemala is the role of psychological factors (perceptions and expectations) in individuals' decision-making process on whether to migrate. While research has been carried out using proxies from existing surveys, research in communities of origin, as well as among migrant communities in Mexico, the U.S. and Canada, on the factors that influence people's decision to leave might shed a new light onto the entire migration process.

Finally, investigating the role of communication among migrants and prospective migrants in Guatemala is a pending, yet promising, task (see Nakache, Pellerin and Veronis, 2015). Much is still to be known and understood about the ways in which information and misinformation travel and influence individuals' decision to migrate.

The MEMO project is now presented with an invaluable opportunity to tackle these questions and produce knowledge for a better understanding of migration dynamics in Guatemala, Central America and their articulation with migration dynamics at the global scale.

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Appendix

Guatemala migration dynamics

Table A. Key events for internal migration

Year/period	Country(ies) involved	Event/policy	Description
1970-1996	Guatemala	Armed conflict	Armed clashes between armies and guerrillas FID Refugees in Mexico
1998	Guatemala, Honduras	Hurricane Mitch	Flooding FID Death of 15,000 people
1990-date	Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador	Social violence, crime, drug trafficking	Increase in postconflict, gang and drug trafficking violence FID
2001	Guatemala	Drought	Internal migration (tbi)
2002	Guatemala	Drought	Internal migration (tbi)
2005	Guatemala Honduras	Tropical storm Stan	Flooding FID
2009	Guatemala	Drought	Internal migration (tbi)
2010	Guatemala	Volcán Pacaya eruption	FID
2010	Guatemala Honduras	Tropical storm Agatha	Flooding FID
2011	Guatemala Honduras	Tropical storm 12E	Flooding FID
2018	Guatemala	Volcán de Fuego eruption	FID
2020-2022	All	COVID-19 pandemic	Restricted mobility

Table B. Key events for short-distance cross-border migration

Year/period	Country(ies) involved	Event/policy	Description
2005	Guatemala	Tropical storm Stan	Destruction of border bridge Interruption of Guatemala-Mexico labor flow
2018-date	Guatemala Migrants from Central America United States	Migrant caravans	Mexico tightens border and immigration controls. It reduces the number of TVTF issued.

Table C. Key events for authorized long-distance cross-border migration

Year/period	Country(ies) involved	Event/policy	Description
1986	U.S.	H2-A and H2-B visas created	Temporary agricultural workers from Guatemala may work in the U.S.
2002	Canada Guatemala	TAWC	Guatemalan agricultural workers may work in Canada
2019	U.S. Guatemala	Temporary agricultural workers program	Specifically targeted TAW visas for Guatemalans

Table D. Key events for unauthorized long-distance cross-border migration

Year/period	Country(ies) involved	Event/policy	Description
2014	Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador U.S.	Unaccompanied minor humanitarian crisis	
2014	Mexico	Plan Frontera Sur	Increased border controls after the unaccompanied minors' humanitarian crisis
2018-2019	Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador Extra-regional migrants	Migrant caravans	Massive migrant flows that reached the U.S. border
2019-2020	U.S.	Migration interdiction measures: MPP and title 42	Massive detentions at the border Humanitarian crisis on the Mexican side, because of all the returned migrants
2020	Global	Covid-19 pandemic	Mobility restrictions
2020	Guatemala and Honduras	Tropical storms Eta and Iota compound the dire economic situation created by Covid-19	New northbound flows
2021	U.S.	Joe Biden's presidency begins	Expectations that migration controls would be relaxed trigger new large northbound flows from Central America

Table E. Key events for inter-continental migration

Year/period	Country(ies) involved	Event/policy	Description
2011-2015	U.S. Cuba	Barack Obama's policy toward Cuba	Large flows of Cuban migrants at the U.S. Mexican border
2018-2019	South American African Asian	Migrant caravans	Massive migrant flows that reached the U.S. border
2019-2020	U.S.	Migration interdiction measures: MPP and title 42	Massive detentions at the border Humanitarian crisis on the Mexican side, because of all the returned migrants
2020	Global	COVID-19 pandemic	Mobility restrictions
2021	U.S.	Joe Biden's presidency begins	Expectations that migration controls would be relaxed trigger new large northbound flows from South America and extracontinental migrants
2022	Venezuela	Worsening economic and political situation	Massive U.S.-bound flows through Guatemala

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