

COMMONS FORUM *Response*

Response to: Demographic Change and Commons Management: A Focus on Migration, by Leticia Durand and Rosalva Landa

Demographic Change, Commons Management, and Migration: A Response

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As Durand and Landa note, common property studies bring a new perspective to migration analysis, shifting the focus to communal institutions and away from an exclusive focus on family-network processes. Though the privileging of family relations and networks has yielded tremendous benefits, it has tended towards an empirical and theoretical slighting of community relations: common property studies help to fill this lacuna by bringing attention to community governance mechanisms that both affect, and are affected by, migration.

Taken together, the exceptional, international wealth of common property studies underscores the necessary relation between commons and its governance. In Mexico, as in other world regions, ethnographic work has traced the contours of common property, demonstrating that the commons is inseparable from the collective labor relations and communalist ideologies that bind so many indigenous communes and collective environmental management networks together, although never in quite the same way. The Mexican instantiation of common property and collective work has shown a marvelous ability to reconfigure itself to meet new challenges. Emerging from indigenous governance modalities in colonial times, perhaps as a corporate communal response to the expansion of latifundias, communal governance includes common property, a set of administrative practices, and an ideology of communality. This communalist social dialectic has served as the lynchpin of cultural survival for Mexican indigenous communities.

However, recent trends in migration and the demographic shifts with which it is associated particularly the consequent hourglass-shaped age structure created by the removal of 15-35 year old women and men while youngsters and elderly remain will certainly have a profound impact upon the future of the commons, bringing new management challenges. First, the exodus of so many younger communalists undercuts their training in communal management practices. Although scholars of common property will recognize the subtlety and socio-technical complexity of indigenous commons management technologies, many migration scholars view (educational) sojourning and (labor) migration as a vehicle to human capital development and may fail to appreciate the importance of long apprenticeships in communal technologies.

It is true that in some cases the increased capabilities of migrants may make them better able to defend their communal property and institutions, as some migrants have themselves argued, yet this is I think a highly contingent sort of argument in which outcomes are dependent upon local histories, cultures and geographies. In Oaxaca, common property is managed under a communal

structure that, typically, includes administrative officers known as cargo-holders and planned work parties called tequios. This cargo/tequio administrative framework is responsible for reproducing common property both as a productive capacity in its own right and as a public infrastructure in support of family-based production. These political institutions include women's independent management capabilities, although, in the case of Oaxaca, women's institutions are increasingly integrated into communal governance. It is not easy for migrants to step back in to these institutions, and, as I have argued elsewhere, migration may well reduce the communal pool of skilled labor available to do the everyday networking with NGOs within Mexico that would help to defend communities from registration and repartition.

To pick up on this last point, any migration-induced difficulties are made doubly problematic by, and perhaps pale in comparison to, the neoliberal-induced attacks on the legal and institutional basis of common property. In particular, the institutional matrix of Mexican Revolutionera institutions have been either dismantled or redirected to militate for the dissolution of common property. By hook or crook, so-called 'brigadistas' from Mexican institutions such as PROCEDE range freely throughout Mexico promoting the repartition of the commons.

These are the real challenges of the contemporary commons, confronted not just in Mexico, but globally. Fortunately communalists themselves have not passively endured these changes, but have worked to increase their communal capacities and protect common property and communal institutions. For instance, I have found that communally-governed villages are, in many cases, more capable of integrating into alternative trade organizations' such as organic coffee producer networks that require a strong local governance capacity to succeed. This has, in many instances, reinvigorated communal cultures and given the best and brightest communalists new opportunities to increase their technical capabilities. The trick is to see how scholar-advocates of the commons may foster these transnational liaisons so as to build a global commons to the benefit of, rather than to the detriment to, local commons.

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